

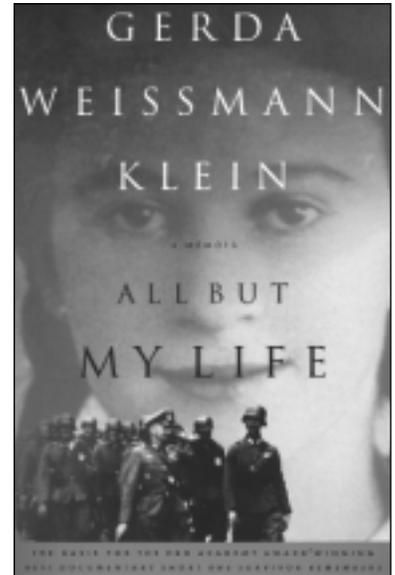


# All But My Life

by Gerda Weissmann Klein

“Soul-searching and human . . . A moving personal testament to courage.”

—Herbert Mitgang, *The New York Times*



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## TO THE TEACHER

*All But My Life* is the unforgettable story of Gerda Weissmann Klein's six-year ordeal as a victim of Nazi cruelty. From her comfortable home in Bielitz (present-day Bielsko) in Poland to her miraculous survival and her liberation by American troops—including the man who was to become her husband—in Volary, Czechoslovakia, in 1945, Gerda takes the reader on a terrifying journey.

Gerda's serene and idyllic childhood is shattered when the Nazis march into Poland on September 3, 1939. Although the Weissmanns were permitted to live for a while in the basement of their home, they were eventually separated and sent to German labor camps. Over the next few years Gerda experienced the slow, inexorable stripping away of “all but her life”. By the end of the war she had lost her parents, brother, home, possessions, and community; even the dear friends she made in the labor camps, with whom she had shared so many hardships, were dead.

Despite her horrifying experiences, Gerda Weissmann Klein conveys great strength of spirit and faith in humanity. In the darkness of the camps, Gerda and her young friends managed to create a community of friendship and love. Although stripped of the essence of life, they were able to survive the barbarity of their captors. Gerda's beautifully written story gives an invaluable message to young people. It introduces

them to this century's terrible history of devastation and prejudice, yet offers them hope that the effects of hatred can be overcome.

PREPARING TO  
READ

The questions, discussion topics, and assignments that follow will enrich your students' understanding of *All But My Life* and significantly expand their knowledge of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Many of your students will have grandparents who remember the war; some of these elders may have fought in the war, others may even be Holocaust survivors themselves. Encourage your students to interview older people who remember the war. Suggest they tape-record these interviews and play them to the class. Students will also be interested in the HBO documentary on Gerda Weissmann Klein, *One Survivor Remembers*, which won the 1996 Academy Award™ for Best Documentary Short. Videocassettes of this film (ISBN 1-55974-587-8) are available from Direct Cinema Limited, P.O. Box 10003, Santa Monica, CA 90418. Urge your students to watch the films and documentaries about Nazi Europe and the Holocaust which frequently appear on television. Have them relate the events that Gerda witnessed to events in our own culture. Could a holocaust happen again? Why, or why not? Current news stories could also be applicable or of interest. Where else in the world are people being driven from their homes, terrorized, and starved? What is the rest of the world doing about it?

UNDERSTANDING  
THE STORY

**BIELITZ (BIELSKO)**

1. What historic event occurred on September 3, 1939? What was its immediate effect on the Weissmanns' lives? What was the Third Reich?
2. On the day of the Nazi invasion, Gerda's parents ask her to telephone the other family members, but when she does so there is no reply (p. 6). Why not? Where have these people gone?
3. Why do Mr. and Mrs. Weissmann feel "relief and pride" (p. 6) when their children insist on staying with them?
4. Why don't Gerda's parents react when the carpet begins to burn (p. 8)?
5. Why does Gerda's brother, Arthur, slap her (p.8)?
6. Why does the "drunken, jubilant mob" in Bielitz believe it has been liberated (p. 9)?

7. When one of Arthur's classmates tells him that young Jewish boys are being murdered in the camps, Arthur says, "Nonsense" (p. 17). Why doesn't he believe this?
8. The night before Arthur leaves home, he sits at his desk "looking through the mementos of his youth" (p. 18). What thoughts do you think are going through Arthur's head?
9. Why does Zeloski, the baker's delivery man, use the past tense when he speaks of Arthur (p. 19)? Why does Gerda say, "I hate you"?
10. Why doesn't Arthur want his family to accompany him to the station? Why doesn't he turn around as he leaves the house?
11. Why does Mrs. Weissmann decide to visit the cemetery after Arthur leaves home?
12. What does the young man tell the concert audience at the resort of Krynica? Why is he carried away by the police? Do you think he really is a maniac?
13. Why does Mr. Weissmann decide that the family should sell all of their belongings? What words would you use to describe Gerda's feelings after the sale?
14. What does Gerda's father have in mind when he says, "Whatever you are thinking now is wrong" (p. 32)? What promise does Gerda make to him at this moment?
15. What does Gerda mean when she says that Niania is an "old Austrian" (p. 34)? Who was the Emperor Franz Josef?
16. Why doesn't Gerda tell her parents about her conversation with Arthur's friend Peter, even after they discover that Arthur is still alive?
17. What does it mean to the Polish Jews that the Germans have violated their pact with the Russians (p. 46)? What will it mean to Arthur?
18. Why is Gerda not able to summon a doctor the night her father has a heart attack?
19. What does Ulla represent to the young Gerda? Why does Gerda decide to learn English, despite the danger of doing so?
20. What is Gerda's initial reaction to Abek? Does she feel positive, negative, or uncertain?

21. How are Gerda's life and character affected by the terrible letter from Erika? What changes have the dreadful events wrought on Erika's own character? "I want to kill, just kill," she writes (p. 70). Would you say that acts of hatred engender more hate?

22. How does Gerda deduce Arthur's changing state of mind from his letters?

23. In April 1942, the Jews in Bielitz are ordered to move to the quarter near the railway terminal which would become their "ghetto." What does the word ghetto mean? What was its original meaning, and what has it come to signify today?

24. Why does Gerda "despise" Niania when she goes to say goodbye (p. 75)?

25. Why do Gerda's parents refuse to look back at their old home when they leave for the ghetto? Why does Gerda choose to look back?

26. Why are Gerda's parents in better spirits when they arrive in their ghetto apartment?

27. What does *Aussiedlung* mean? Why is the word so resonant for the Bielitz Jews?

28. What does *Judenrein* mean?

29. How would you describe the farewell Gerda's parents take of one another: joyful, sorrowful, or a combination of the two? What legacy do they leave the young Gerda?

30. Who is Merin? Why does he say to Gerda, "Are you crazy?" (p. 90)? Why does he throw her back on the truck and say, "You are too young to die" (p. 91)? Is it because he pities her and wants to save her life, or because, as a worker, she will be useful to the Nazi State?

31. Why does Gerda walk away from her mother without looking back?

## **SOSNOWITZ**

1. "Now I have to live," Gerda reflects on the train (p. 95). What reasons does she give for wanting to live?

2. What is the Militz? How does it differ from the ordinary police force? Why does the Militz Commander feel so hostile toward his own race? Why does he agree to give Gerda her permit?

3. Why is Abek's family so generous and hospitable to Gerda? What is Gerda's reaction to their kindness?
4. What is a Dulag?
5. Who are the "living skeletons" Gerda meets in the Dulag? Where are they to be sent?
6. Why does Gerda refuse the working card and decide to move on to the camp? What does her decision have to do with Abek? Why doesn't she want any "special privileges" (p. 107)?
7. During the train ride to the camp, why does Suse Kunz say that she feels "pretty good, in spite of everything" (p. 113)? Does this statement reflect Gerda's mood?

#### **BOLKENHAIN**

1. Who is Frau Kügler?
2. Bolkenhain is Gerda's first view of the "homeland of Nazism" (p. 114). How do the Germans there seem different from those she observed in Poland? What is "propaganda," and what effect has it had on the German people's preconceptions about Jews?
3. Who is Mrs. Berger? What does she imply in her short speech to the young women (p. 116)? Do you believe that her methods for dealing with the prisoners were good ones? Do you find her a sympathetic character?
4. Why does the moon become Gerda's "loyal friend"? What does the moon signify to her?
5. Why do the inmates of Bolkenhain have to wear three stars? Why is it necessary that they be identified as Jews from every angle?
6. Who is Meister Zimmer? How do his attitude and behavior differ from those of Frau Kugler?
7. How does Mrs. Berger get Gerda to acknowledge her father's death? Do you think Mrs. Berger's method is kind? What method does Gerda use to cope with the dreadful knowledge?

8. Under what government did Gerda's grandfather live? Why was he exiled to Siberia? Why was he not given a trial? Why was he released and allowed to go home?
9. What is Yom Kippur? Why do the prisoners decide to fast, and what satisfaction do they derive from this fasting?
10. Why is Lotte weeping at the camp fence? Why is she, unlike Gerda, unable to draw on happy memories to help her survive?
11. What makes Gerda sense that she will never see Arthur again after receiving his frayed, dirty letter?
12. How did Frau Kügler save Gerda's life? Do you believe that genuine affection existed between Frau Kügler and the girls under her care?
13. How did Abek's mother and sisters die? What mixed emotions does their fate inspire in Gerda? Why is she ashamed of her own feelings?
14. What message does Gerda communicate in the play she writes and performs for her fellow prisoners? In what way does the play manage to convey hope? What does Gerda get out of the experience of putting on the play, and why does she count it as the "greatest thing I have done in my life" (p. 142)?
15. In the summer of 1943, a change comes over Bolkenhain: incoming mail is cut off, Meister Zimmer becomes abusive, and there is not enough raw material for spinning. What is the meaning of this multifaceted change? What turn is the war taking for the Germans?

#### **MARZDORF**

1. How do the Marzdorf *Judenälteste* and *Lagerführerin* differ from their counterparts at Bolkenhain? What does this mean for the inmates?
2. Who is Frau Aufsicht?
3. Why is the supervisor's question to Gerda, "Are you hungry?" (p. 147) a "tricky" one?
4. What keeps Gerda from throwing herself under a train and ending her life?

## LANDESHUT

1. Upon seeing Litzi, Frau Kugler, and Mrs. Berger again, Gerda's reaction is "This was home!" (p. 153). What has she learned from her experiences at Marzdorf?
2. What does Gerda state to be the most important quality in a future husband? Why do the other girls laugh at her opinion? Do you agree with her or with them?
3. Why did Abek volunteer to come to Burgberg? Gerda feels responsible for his coming. Do you think that she is responsible? If so, does she make up for it by her loving behavior to Abek during his last days?
4. Why do Italian prisoners suddenly appear in Burgberg? What has happened in the war to turn the Italians and the Germans into enemies?
5. Why did Gerda decline to see Abek in Burgberg, writing him a note instead?

## GRUNBERG

1. Who is the *Betriebsleiter*? This man is what one would describe as a sadist. What is a sadist, and which of the *Betriebsleiter's* characteristics are sadistic?
2. What is the *Spinnerei*? Why is it so dangerous to work there?
3. What is tuberculosis? What happens to the girls who contract it in Grunberg?
4. What impact does the beating by the SS guard have on Gerda? How does it affect her will to survive? How does it affect the other girls?
5. Why are the girls undressed and given numbers (pp. 178-179)?
6. Why does Gerda want to procure poison?

## THE MARCH

1. Why do the authorities decide to embark on the march to Czechoslovakia? What turn in the war has prompted this flight?
2. Why do Gerda and Ilse not carry out Gerda's plan to go to the police station? What might have happened to them had they done this?

3. What does Tusia mean when she says that Gerda has given her “belief in humanity” (p. 197)? What is Gerda’s response? Is her decision to make up “good news” for the other girls a good one? Explain your answer.

4. Why do the guards abandon the marchers?

5. What is the significance of the white flag hanging from the church steeple in Volary?

#### **VOLARY**

1. What is Gerda’s first impression of Lt. Kurt Klein? What does he represent to her? Why does she feel compelled to tell him they are Jews? What is his response?

2. When does Gerda finally admit to herself that her parents are dead? Why has she delayed the acknowledgement until this moment?

3. What does Kurt mean when he says, “It seems we fought a war against the Nazis, but I haven’t met a Nazi yet” (p. 221)?

4. Why does Gerda compare herself to Hans Christian Andersen’s mermaid?

5. What are Gerda’s emotions on seeing Liesel, Suse, and Ilse’s graves? Why does she turn abruptly away from them?

#### **EPILOGUE**

1. Gerda writes, “Survival is both an exalted privilege and a painful burden” (p. 247). What does she mean by this? In what way is it a burden?

2. What does the State of Israel symbolize to Gerda?

3. What are Gerda’s feelings about suicide? What has formed these opinions?

4. What is the significance of Gerda’s guilt over having purloined, long ago, a rum ball? How does this guilt figure into her current life?

5. Why was she unable to speak German on the radio? Why does Gerda prefer speaking English to any other language?

1. In her Preface, Gerda writes, “I feel at peace, at last. I have discharged a burden, and paid a debt to many nameless heroes.” What burden has she discharged, what debt has she paid? What has been achieved by her relating the stories of Lotte, Erika, and others?
2. What motivations kept the Weissmanns from fleeing Poland before the Nazi invasion, as Uncle Leo suggested they should do? Did Mrs. Weissmann make a mistake in deeming her husband’s health their primary concern? Why did the Weissmanns continue to hope that everything would be all right? Later, Aunt Anna urges the Weissmanns to accompany her into the *Gouvernement*. Why do they refuse to go? Was their decision justified?
3. Gerda couldn’t understand why her neighbors made a Nazi flag to hang from the Weissmanns’ house. What do you think their motivations were? Might this action have helped the Weissmanns?
4. At the ruins of the Jewish Temple in Bielitz, Arthur gives Gerda a little piece of glass. Why does Gerda keep the glass for so long? What does it come to signify to her?
5. How does Gerda’s vision of her parents change during the course of the book? What words would you use to describe her feelings about them when she is a young girl at the beginning of the war; at the end of the war, after their deaths; and as an older woman, a mother herself, looking back over the years?
6. On the door of Mr. Weissmann’s factory, the Nazis place a sign that says: *Dogs and Jews Not Allowed to Enter* (p. 26). Do you think the Nazis treated the Jewish people better, or worse, than dogs? In what ways did they consider the Jews useful to them and therefore worthy to be kept alive?
7. When the Weissmanns move into the basement of their house, Trude, who is about to move from the basement to the main part of the house, says “without malice or sarcasm” (p. 33) that she will be glad to have a nice place to spend Christmas. Do you think that Trude is really without malice? Do you think she might feel resentment for the difficult, impoverished childhood she has led? Why might she, and people like her, irrationally blame the Jewish population for their troubles?
8. What role does religion play in the lives of the Weissmann family? How do Gerda’s religious beliefs evolve over the course of the book? Why, during the final march through Czechoslovakia, does Gerda stop praying?

9. Of all the Germans Gerda meets during the war, only two—the officer in Bielitz who discovered her English textbook and Frau Kügler—“behaved as though they were human” (p. 51). What can account for the fact that so many people acted with such incredible cruelty? Do you believe that the German nation should be held collectively responsible for the atrocities against the Jewish people? Or do you think that the kind of madness that overtook them is latent in all human beings?

10. How would you describe Abek’s character? Can you understand Gerda’s negative feelings toward him? How do their characters differ? How do their attitudes toward religion differ? Do you think that Gerda led Abek on, or that she dealt with him in the most sympathetic and humane way possible? How does Erika’s letter about her love for Henek help to make Gerda understand her own feelings for Abek?

11. Reflecting upon the horrible scene in which families were separated and thrown into trucks, Gerda wonders, “Why? Why did we walk like meek sheep to the slaughterhouse? Why did we not fight back?” (p. 89). What answer does she give? Does that answer seem sufficient to you? What other reasons might you give?

13. Frau Kügler “appeared grim and forbidding,” but “her harsh appearance turned out to conceal a kind heart” (p. 114). What lesson does Gerda learn about the difference between appearance and reality? What other characters in her story present a deceptive exterior? A terrible situation, especially one like war, can bring out evil and rapacious qualities in some people. Does it seem to you that it can also bring out extraordinary and unexpected qualities in others? What other examples does the book provide?

14. Gerda relates the dramatic story of her grandfather’s exile in Siberia and his return home (pp. 125-126). In what ways does his story resemble that of Gerda and her family? How does this memory help her to accept her situation in the camp? To what extent, in your opinion, were the governments of Czarist Russia and Nazi Germany similar to one another? How highly did they value human life? Would you say that the word “authoritarian” describes both systems?

15. Although Gerda loses her family early in the war, she enjoys firm friendships with girls like Ilse and Suse. What does friendship come to mean to Gerda? How instrumental is it in keeping her alive and full of hope?

16. Could Gerda and her fellow prisoners be described as slaves? How do Gerda’s definition of freedom, and her feelings about freedom, change over the course of her imprisonment? How does she manage, occasionally, to achieve feelings of freedom?

17. How would you describe the character of Lt. Kurt Klein? Why is he so well matched with Gerda? What does he, as an American, a Jew, and a liberator, symbolize to Gerda? How does Kurt's character differ from Abek's?

18. Gerda describes her childhood as "safe and sheltered, too sheltered perhaps for what the years ahead were to bring, but full of lovely memories from which to draw strength" (p. 24). Do you believe that Gerda's happy childhood and loving family contributed to her ability to survive where so many others did not? At the end of the book, she says that her childhood "in all probability was not as perfect as I have chosen to remember" (p. 258). Why has Gerda chosen to remember only the happy times with her parents? What other characteristics have helped to make Gerda a survivor?

19. Gerda writes, "Throughout my years in the camps, and against nearly insuperable odds, I knew of no one who committed suicide" (p. 250). Why do you think these people, who suffered such great loss and pain, did not resort to suicide, when many people take their lives for seemingly lesser reasons?

EXPANDING YOUR  
KNOWLEDGE

1. Read a short history of World War II, either in a book or in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Then vertically divide a piece of paper in half. On the left side place events from *All But My Life* and the dates they took place. Next, look up what events took place in the war on those dates and place them on the right half of the page. How can the events that immediately affected Gerda be explained by the larger history of the war itself? Which dates does the author consider most important? Which do you consider the most important?

2. Find a map of wartime Europe. Locate Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia; within them, locate Bielitz, Sosnowitz, Bolkenhain, Marzdorf, Landeshut, and Grunberg. Trace the route of the march from Grunberg to Volary.

3. Interview someone who lived during World War II (if possible, find someone who fought in the war or who lived in Europe at that time). You may want to ask the following questions: How did you first learn about the war? How did your life change as a result of the war? How did you follow war news? When did you hear about the Holocaust and how did this news affect you?

4. Although Nazi Germany constituted the most notorious chapter in the history of anti-Semitism, it did not invent this particular prejudice, which dates back almost as far as Christianity itself. Research the history of anti-Semitism. How did it begin? Why and how did it continue? In which countries, and in which

centuries, has it been most pervasive? Have there been other Jewish holocausts in history? Have you observed incidents of anti-Semitism in your own community?

5. Many people called World War I (1914-1918), in which many millions died, “the war to end all wars,” and most Europeans, like Gerda’s father, found it impossible to believe that such devastation could occur again. World War I ended with the defeated Germans being forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles, which demanded excessively harsh reparations from the already devastated country. Research World War I and the Versailles treaty. In your opinion, was the treaty unfair or unreasonable? Might it indeed have sown the seeds of Nazi hatred?

6. Read a book on the history of Nazism (you might choose one from the suggested reading list below, or find one of your own choice). How did the movement begin? Why did so many people listen to Hitler and take him seriously? How did Nazism compare with the Fascism of the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini? In America, in the last few years, there have been numerous cases of neo-Nazism, accompanied by the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and other acts of hate. These neo-Nazis claim that their hate-inspired writing and speech is protected by the First Amendment, which guarantees “freedom of speech” for all. Do you believe that such hatred should be protected? Likewise, should the Ku Klux Klan be legally permitted to march, burn crosses, and spread racist and anti-Semitic literature?

7. Mrs. Weissmann says, “It will be as it was with Napoleon” (p. 44), as she tries to believe that Hitler’s swift progress will soon be reversed. Where, and how, did Napoleon’s fortunes change? Did Hitler’s eventual defeat resemble Napoleon’s? Research the history of Central Europe, Gerda’s home. How many wars have taken place there in the last five hundred years?

8. “Neutrality with Russia had been violated; German troops had crossed the frontier” (p. 46). For the Weissmanns, this meant that things would get worse for Arthur; but for the Nazis, it was to mean a new, and powerful, enemy. As you research the history of World War II, look up the Nazi-Soviet pact. How and why did Communists and Fascists, who had such different ideologies, join forces? What caused their falling out? What was Russia’s enmity to mean for Germany?

9. In the Nuremberg war crimes trials that were held immediately after the war, many of the Nazi leaders were tried and many were sentenced. But not all of the war criminals were caught. Even today, a few who have lived in hiding for decades are being caught and brought to trial. Find the names of some Nazis who have been brought to justice in the last twenty years. What were their crimes? What sort of lives did they lead in hiding? What punishments were they finally given? What is the purpose of pursuing the perpetrators after so many years?

ACTIVITIES FOR  
THE CLASSROOM

10. Look into recent news reports of murder and genocide concerning present-day Bosnia and Africa. How do these events resemble, or differ from, the Holocaust during World War II? How is the international community responding? What is the UN doing about it? What should be done?

In order to put the events of an individual's life into the context of real history, students can research and construct a timeline—a visual representation that shows the events of their subject's life in juxtaposition with the events of the world (political, military, social, etc.). Alone or in a small group, select a year from the book (between 1939–1945). Review the events of Gerda Klein's life during that year. Then, research the events of the war and those occurring in the world during the same year. Find a way to show visually how the two sets of events fit together. Using newspaper articles, photographs, and other media, construct and present the timeline to the class.

Create an original poem based on the book. Choose a passage in the book that is particularly meaningful to you—an image, an idea, a person or place, a relationship, an event, a moment in time. Find a direct quote from the book that captures it. Put the quote at the top of the page. Choose a point of view and a voice. Who or what will be the speaker in the poem? Make a list of images and ideas that would help express how quotation makes you feel. Include emotions as well as concrete imagery. Choose a form (free verse, rhymed verse, ballad, villanelle, sonnet, etc.). Use the devices of sense, sound, and form to extend the meaning of your words. (Devices of sense: simile, metaphor, personification, etc.; devices of sound: alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme, etc.; devices of form: rhythm, repetition, refrain, parallelism, juxtaposition.) Illustrate your poem. Think about how the illustration adds to what you are trying to express in the poem.

OTHER RESOURCES

**FURTHER READING**

*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank; *The Holocaust* and *The Boys* by Martin Gilbert; *The Destruction of the European Jews* by Raul Hilberg; *The Hours After* by Gerda Weissmann Klein and Kurt Klein; *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi; *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William L. Shirer; *On Burning Ground* by Michael Skakun; *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Volumes 1 and 2 by Art Spiegelman; *The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman; *The Summer of My German Soldier* by Betty Greene; *The Temple Bombing* by Melissa Fay Greene; *Schindler's List* by Thomas Keneally; *In the Beginning* by Chaim Potok; *The Good War* by Studs Terkel; and *The Night Trilogy*\* by Elie Wiesel.

\* A Hill and Wang Teacher's Guide is also available for this title.

## FILMS

*The Diary of Anne Frank; Europa, Europa; Pillar of Fire; The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich; Schindler's List; Shoah; The Sorrow and the Pity.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerda Weissmann Klein was born in Bielsko, Poland, in 1924, and now lives in Arizona with her husband, Kurt Klein, who as a U.S. Army lieutenant liberated Gerda Weissmann on May 7, 1945. The author of five books, she has received many awards and honorary degrees and has lectured throughout the country for the past forty-five years. *One Survivor Remembers* (a production of Home Box Office and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), winner of an Emmy Award and the Academy Award™ for documentary short subject, was based on *All But My Life*.

Author photo courtesy of the United States Holocaust Museum

## NOTES

**NOTES**

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