

# **All But My Life Study Guide**

**All But My Life by Gerda Weissmann Klein**

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# Contents

<a href="#">All But My Life Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Part 1: Chapters 1 and 2.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Part 1: Chapters 3 and 4.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Part 1: Chapters 5 and 6.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Part 1: Chapters 7 and 8.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapters 9 and 10.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part 1: Chapters 11 and 12.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Part 2: Chapters 1 and 2.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Part 2: Chapters 3 and 4.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part 2: Chapters 5 and 6.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Part 2: Chapters 7 and 8.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Part 2: Chapters 9 and 10.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Part 2: Chapters 11 and 12.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Part 2: Chapters 13, 14 and 15.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Part 3: Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 and Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>



## Plot Summary

All But My Life by Gerda Weissmann Klein is the true story of her family's tragic struggle as Polish Jews during the German invasion in World War II. Their family, relatives, and friends, along with the young teen's hopes and dreams, are destroyed by the invading Nazis. The reader must be prepared for a touching, emotionally wrought story that will bring the hardest of hearts to tears. That these actual experiences happened within the last seventy years is unthinkable. No measure of understanding can be applied to the barbaric treatment of one group of human beings by another as described in this story. Everyone knows the story of the Holocaust in a historic sense. But reading and absorbing the details, the humiliation, fear, terror, and pain that Gerda and her family are forced to endure touch the very soul of the reader.

Gerda is a happy and popular fifteen-year-old girl in the town of Bielitz when the Germans invade. She lives with her mother, Helene, father Julius, and older brother Arthur. The family is close and loving. Julius is the part-owner of a fur factory in town. Helene is a loving and nurturing mother who dotes on her two precious children. Gerda has many girlfriends around town and is an intelligent and creative young student with a spirit that proves later to be essential to her very survival. The Jews in Bielitz are required to register. This registration allots them less food than others and marks them for further hardship and humiliation. Eventually, the Germans take all their valuables and possessions. Gerda's pleasant family home had been in Helene's family for decades. The Germans force the Weissmanns to move in their cellar while a German family moves into their former living quarters upstairs.

Arthur is the first family member sent off to a labor camp. His touching departure is a heart-wrenching scene. While Helene tries to stay positive and strong, Julius, who is ill, cannot bear seeing his son go off to an uncertain future and is reduced to sobs, never fully recovering. After two years of occupation in their hometown, Gerda and her parents learn that they will be sent to labor camps. Julius is sent off to a male camp in the opposite direction of the female camp Gerda and Helene are sent to. Gerda sadly watches her father standing on the back of the train fade off in the horizon. Gerda and her mother are at the same female camp for a short period before they are separated. Gerda is sent to another labor camp while her mother is sent to a death camp. Although Gerda holds out hope for years, she never again sees her parents or brother again.

Over the four years Gerda is in forced labor camps she goes through unspeakable horrors and humiliation. Gerda becomes friends with many of the girls at these various camps. She sees many die of disease, mistreatment, or despicable living conditions. Once the Allied Troops start advancing, girls from several camps are amassed. The girls, numbering in the thousands, are forced to march for months to elude the advancing armies. Many of the girls die from exposure, beatings, or murder along the way. There are only 125 surviving girls once they reach Volray, Czechoslovakia, the town in which they are finally liberated. It takes Gerda, who weighs only sixty-seven pounds, months to recover her health. The first US soldier she meets on the day of her liberation is Kurt Klein. They fall in love and marry a few years later and move to the US.

Gerda becomes a lecturer and author, a way to honor and keep alive the memory of her beloved family and to remind the world to never let anything like this horror happen again.



# Part 1: Chapters 1 and 2

## Part 1: Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

All But My Life by Gerda Weissmann Klein is the true story of her family's tragic struggle as Polish Jews during the German invasion in World War II.

Fifteen-year-old Gerda Weissmann's attention is transfixed on the watch laying on the carpet stuck at 9:10 on Sunday, September 3, 1939. It is the moment that the Nazis are descending upon her small town of Bielitz, Poland. It is the day that will change the rest of her and her family's lives forever. With the rumble of tanks and the sounds of "Heil Hitler", the formerly serene town was under besiege. Gerda's uncle had sent a cable in August warning the Weissmanns that "Poland's last hour has come." However, Gerda's mother, Helene, kept the message from her husband, who was recovering from a mild heart attack. Therefore, the family had waited to escape pending Gerda's father's recovery.

The days leading up to the invasion were wrought with rocket-red skies casting an eerie hue on Gerda's household. On Friday, Gerda's father, Julius, orders her and her nineteen-year-old brother, Arthur, to leave with family friends. The children refuse, which heartens their sick father. He feels that God wants them together and will take care of them. On Saturday the electricity is out and the attack begins in earnest. On Sunday morning a flag bearing a swastika is waving from a house across the way. Neighbors are passing out treats and drinks to German soldiers. They are shouting "Heil Hitler" and giving the German soldiers flowers and praise for their liberation. Gerda is stunned at their cowardice and collapses into uncontrollable tears.

The Germans conquer Poland in just eighteen days. The Polish people are hopeful of being rescued by the allies. The Weissmanns live in a hundred-year-old family home that is large and comfortable. Soon after the invasion, the townspeople have to register with the German police and the Jews are forced to turn in all their valuables including gold, automobiles, and even fountain pens. Gerda's father and brother continue to hide in the closet when German soldiers stop by. There is word that some Jewish men are led off by the Germans and never seen again.

Arthur, who is very depressed, decides to venture into town to see if his girlfriend and her family made it back home. He returns soon after only with the news that his girlfriend's family dog is lying dead in front of their home.



# Part 1: Chapters 3 and 4

## Part 1: Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

In mid-October, a note comes in the mail that all men between sixteen and fifty must register. They will be sent to the inner part of Poland to repair damage done by the war. Arthur and David already knew they would have to go. The two young men choose to ignore rumors that some of the boys were immediately slaughtered in the woods. Arthur gives Gerda a piece of glass to remind her to stay strong. She later loses it in Czechoslovakia but always remembers the message. Arthur wakes early the day he must leave. Gerda is sent out to buy rolls for what would be his last meal with his family. She reacts in anger when the baker tells her she will never see her brother again. The breakfast is especially difficult on Gerda's father. As they must all finally tell him good-bye, Gerda's mother stays strong and tells Arthur she knows he will see them all again soon. Gerda wants to walk with him to the train but he refuses. She knows that he does not want her to see him locked up in a cattle car.

Gerda is able to console herself by thinking of happy past and future good times. Her thoughts are devoid of the present. She thinks back to the summer when she and her mother vacationed at the elegant summer spot of Krynica. As the tourists listened to Viennese waltzes dressed in their finest, she recalls a young man warning them of impending war. Her father sends for them. When they return, they find him pale and ill. Her father's business partner, Mr. Pipersberg visits her father. They both have an interest in a fur factory in town. Gerda walks with Mr. Pipersberg to see if the plant is still standing. As they arrive, they see German soldiers loading pelts onto their trucks. They see a sign that says, "Dogs and Jews Not Allowed to Enter." Mr. Pipersberg sends Gerda away. He returns to the Weissmann home later that night, bloodied and in pain. He had entered the factory where he was exposed as a "Jew" and beaten by the German soldiers. Gerda tends to his wounds. He tells her not to tell her father as it would only alarm him and weaken his condition.

# Part 1: Chapters 5 and 6

## Part 1: Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

The Weissmans sell some of their personal belongings—a tablecloth her mother labored on for a year, crystal glasses she gave her parents for their anniversary, artwork on the wall that left sad, clean rectangles on the wall. Helene has totally collapsed and asks for Arthur over and over again. Their departure is detained but is still looming. Sensing that his daughter is contemplating suicide, Julius makes Gerda vow to never take her own life. She clings to that vow in the future many times when death seems the best option.

After Christmas, the rations that Jews receive are cut down to half of what non-Jews receive. Jews must also wear the Star of David sewn on their clothes with the word "Jew" written across it. They hear from Arthur's girlfriend that he is safe and in Russia. Peter, a friend of Arthur's, visits and explains that Arthur's letters are being delayed by censors. Helene and Julius are overjoyed to hear that Arthur is still alive. Peter tells Gerda privately that he is fabricating the story about Arthur's letters to make his parents feel better. Gerda keeps this ominous information to herself. Finally, the family gratefully receives a letter from Arthur in his own handwriting. He and David are safe in Russia. The family reads and re-reads the letter continuously. Arthur addresses Gerda in the letter—telling her he knows she is being strong. This message stays with Gerda forever.



# Part 1: Chapters 7 and 8

## Part 1: Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

Arthur sends frequent letters. He has a job and sends money to his parents to help them. Gerda is learning German writing and reading from her father, Julius. The village of Bielitz at one time had eight thousand Jews. By the spring of 1940 there are only several hundred. There are virtually no young men left and only a few young girls remain. Only Gerda and two of her friends still have both parents. The family is almost out of money. Helene is talented at knitting and crocheting wearing apparel. Gerda helps her mother unravel sweaters and other garments to make new items for sale. Since the family can only buy food on the black market, Helene takes her pay in food for the clothing she makes for sale.

Gerda receives a letter from Arthur on her birthday. She kisses his letter and dances with it in the garden. Gerda collapses into tears, however, feeling sorry that she is missing the fun and laughter that a young life should contain. Gerda enjoys the garden and her father needs the fresh air for his health. Sadly, however, Gerda finds a sign that says, "Germans Only" in her yard, taking that escape away from her. She has a friend who lives near a graveyard. Gerda and her friend walk among the graves as one of the only safe ways for them to enjoy the outside. Gerda maintains hope that the Germans will be defeated by allied forces. Her fragile hopes are challenged when word comes that Paris has been invaded. She can see the fear in her father's eyes. But as 1940 fades away, Gerda feels that the new year will bring her family's freedom. The news that the area where Arthur is working has been taken over from the Russians by the Germans shakes the family.

A friend tells Gerda that a camp for young Jewish boys has been established just outside the town. After first resisting, she agrees to visit the camp with her friend. At the camp, they visit one of the rooms where a man around thirty years of age keeps a watchful eye on Gerda. She visits a room where stolen artwork is being stored. The young man who had been watching her asks her to pose for a painting. Gerda refuses and leaves with her friend. The young man, Abek Feigenblatt, walks them home. Gerda is annoyed by the young man but still somewhat drawn to him. He tells her he will see her again.

Gerda takes her father to the town's graveyard so that he can get some fresh air. Julius is reading the Hebrew inscriptions on the graves to Gerda when Abek appears. Julius is pleased to learn that Abek is also fluent in Hebrew. Abek promises to bring Julius a book written in Hebrew that the elder man had been wanting to read. Julius senses that Abek is interested in his daughter but Gerda tells her father she has no such interest in return. But Abek is persistent and begins visiting Gerda every day. They do become very good friends. The family continues to get sporadic correspondence from Arthur.





Gerda's friend Ilse tells Gerda that the Germans discovered her piano and announced that they would be taking it. She is very upset and asks Gerda to come back with her and listen to her play her final songs on the piano. In a very poignant segment, Ilse plays her songs for Gerda. She plays not just a few songs but many and all day—as though her continuous play will preclude the theft of her piano. Gerda is joined by Abek who soon reveals his strong feelings for Gerda. He professes his love for her. Abek tells Gerda that he will soon be transported to a camp. He asks Gerda to marry him after he returns from the camp. She does not have the same feelings for him. He realizes he is pressuring her and apologizes for his behavior.



# Part 1, Chapters 9 and 10

## Part 1, Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

Gerda receives a letter from her friend, Erika, who is living with her parents near the former Polish-Russian border. Erika tells Gerda of her joy. She is in love with a boy named Henek and they plan to marry. Gerda realizes more than ever that she does not share this joy when she thinks of Abek. Abek still pursues Gerda, who continues to resist his advances. Gerda's parents support her feelings, although they have sympathy for Abek.

Sadly, Gerda receives an emotional letter from Erika. In the middle of the night, Erika's mother and little baby brother were taken by the Germans. They and many other villagers were taken to a concrete square in the town, forced to lay naked on the ground and trampled by soldiers on their horses. Those who survived were forced to dig their own graves before they were shot to death.

With no news from Arthur and the troubling letter from Erika, Gerda vents her fear and anguish to Abek. But Gerda keeps her fears from her parents. The winter is harsh and Gerda looks forward to the spring when keeping warm will not be an issue. However, had she known what Spring 1941 was to bring she would have gladly stayed cold. On April 19, 1941, all Jews were ordered to a remote quarter in the town which was to become essentially a Jewish Ghetto. Gerda rushes to say good-bye to Niania, who begs her to stay with her. Gerda says an emotional good-bye to the garden she so loves. It brings back memories of the fun she and her brother had in the garden, the family birthdays that were celebrated there, the beautiful violets she would pick and bring to her mother. Gerda caresses a familiar branch, kisses it and tells it good-bye forever. Niania bids the family a tearful good-bye as they and their meager belongings are carted off in a peasant's wagon. Gerda is the only one who has strength to look back at her family's home as it disappears in the horizon.



# Part 1: Chapters 11 and 12

## Part 1: Chapters 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

In the Jewish Ghetto, the Weissmanns wind up in a decrepit apartment that they share with another family. There is only a meager 250 Jewish families left in Bielitz. There are rumors and constant fear that they will soon be carted off to dreaded locations such as Auschwitz or other labor camps.

Gerda and her father have a breathtaking scare. A Gestapo officer bangs on the door. Julius hides in the closet. The officer presses a gun against Gerda's chest, demanding to see her father. He is threatening to shoot her when he hears the signal that the man he is searching for has been found. Julius is shaken and makes Gerda promise not to tell her mother of this experience.

On May 8th, Gerda is wakened by her parents who are wishing her a happy birthday. Her mother gifts her with an orange. Gerda had not seen an orange in three years. They want her to eat it all but she convinces them to each eat some. This orange will wind up being the last gift Gerda is to receive from her parents. Word comes that all Jews must register for work. The men will work in Sucha and the women in Wadowitz, each twenty miles away from Bielitz but in different directions. Gerda worries about her sick father having to do hard labor and wake at 4 am each day. There are aspects of Gerda's job in a sewing shop that she enjoyed. A devastating blow hits the Weissmanns when the announcement is made that a camp has been established in Sucha and that Julius would be moved there.

The heart wrenching departure of Julius is unbearable for Gerda and her mother. A tearful Julius makes Gerda promise to wear her ski shoes when she goes to Wadawitz the next day. Julius stands on the end of the train in his best suit. This identity of this kind and honorable man is reduced to the one black word on his yellow star, "JEW."

Gerda and her mother assemble with the other women in the field where they wait in the rain for four hours. They witness the departure of others as they await their fate. A sick woman thrown on a cart screams for her daughter but is kicked into silence. Only in later years does Gerda realize why her family and the others put up no resistance. They had misjudged the Germans—they had the faith in these men who were fellow humans. Gerda is separated from her mother forever. Helene marches with the group who will be sent to their deaths. Gerda is sent with the young female Jews who will be spared for now. Gerda screams for her mother who yells to her daughter to be strong—the last words Gerda will ever hear from her mother.

## Part 2: Chapters 1 and 2

### Part 2: Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Gerda and the other young women from Bielitz are herded onto a train that sits for hours before it finally lurches forward. The destination is unknown, but the train finally stops and Gerda sees a dim sign that announces that they have arrived in Sosnowitz. Gerda remembers that Sosnowitz is Abek's hometown. The next morning, a new spirit has evolved within Gerda. She can take risks now that her parents aren't around to receive punishment for her actions. She opens a door marked "private." Sitting at his desk is a Militz official who is surprised at her presence. She boldly tells him that she needs to visit her relatives (actually Abek's relatives) in the town. The man seems to admire her bravery and shows the young Gerda unexpected respect. He provides Gerda with identification which she will need to visit Abek's relatives.

Gerda is escorted by a Militz officer to Abek's family home. She is greeted lovingly by Abek's sisters and mother. The sisters offer to help Gerda gain a work license so she can work with them on their sewing duties. Although Gerda gets permission to work with Abek's sisters, she declines the opportunity. So as not to offend them, she asks the official to tell Abek's family that she was not allowed to accept the offer. A short while later, she has second thoughts about giving up her chance to be free and begs the official to grant her the work permit after all. Sadly, it was already assigned to another girl and Gerda is destined to be transported to the new camp.



## Part 2: Chapters 3 and 4

### Part 2: Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Gerda and Ilse walk toward the train for the trip to the new camp. One of the Miltz officers rushes towards Gerda with a note from the Miltz commander. The officer indicates that the commander was giving her permission to stay behind and not be forced to the camp. Defiantly, Gerda tears up the note before reading it. She and Ilse take a seat with the other girls heading for the new labor camp. She befriends a lovely young girl from Czechoslovakia. The girl, Suse, bets strawberries and cream that they will be at the camp a year and Gerda bets that it will be six months. Later, Suse wins the bet but Gerda does not pay. Sadly, Suse dies on the morning of their liberation.

The girls line up in a German town named "Bolkenhain", where they meet Frau Kugler, who calls them to attention. Frau Kugler seems very grim and militaristic, but later proves to have a kind heart. They are marched to a factory where they again are lined up. The girls are given work assignments. They are instructed to wear three yellow stars—two on their clothing and one on their head scarfs. In this way, they could be recognized as Jews from any angle. An older girl named Malvine Berger is assigned as the senior Jewess in charge of their group. Since Ilse and Gerda have no specific skills, they are placed in the group who will learn to weave. If they do well, they will not have to return to a Dulag. Although Mrs. Berger seems to want to shine in her captor's eyes, she ultimately is a positive force in life in the camp. Bolkenhain becomes known as one of the best labor camps for women in Germany. The living quarters attached to the factory were clean and new. The first night Gerda falls asleep looking at the large moon, asking it to keep an eye on her parents.

Mrs. Berger slaps one of the girls for not getting up on time for work. Although the incident bothers Gerda, she later realizes that Mrs. Berger had to establish her authority. Over the three years that Gerda is at the camp, rarely is Mrs. Berger ever physically abusive to anyone. The first morning, Gerda and Ilse are marched to the factory where Meister Zimmer, their weaving instructor, informs the girls that they must work for Germany and the glorious Nazi party, warning them that traitors are exterminated.

Gerda writes an upbeat letter to her father at Sucha describing her existence in glowing colors. Gerda is hopeful everyday that she will receive a reply from her father. But days goes by without a letter. She writes to Abek asking about her parents and hopes to get his reply. One day her name is called at mail call. It looks as though it is from her father but rather it is her letter to her father returned without a forwarding address. Gerda is besides herself in despair and is called into Mrs. Berger's room. Mrs. Berger tries to console her and convinces her that she must face reality.



## Part 2: Chapters 5 and 6

### Part 2: Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

Gerda begins receiving daily letters from Abek, many of them with romantic allusions. He forwards photos he found left behind in the Weissmann's abandoned Bielitz apartment. He also reluctantly forwards a letter her father had sent via Abek some time before. Gerda could see why he did not want to send her the letter—the handwriting was so weak compared to his healthy hand that Gerda takes it as an ominous sign.

Gerda continues to get letters from Abek and receives a large carton of clothes from him at Christmas. Gerda becomes ill and unable to work. However, one day Frau Kugler makes her get up and sit at her work station. The dreaded SS Officer Lindner walks through the factory. He is the one who sends the sick Jews to their death at Auschwitz. Only then did Gerda realize why Frau Kugler forced her to sit at her loom. Frau made her appear healthy and productive and thus saved her life.

Gerda receives a letter from Arthur. He tells her to be strong and not worry. He sounds more like the brother she knew. Sadly, it is the last time she ever hears from him.

Gerda hears from Abek that his entire family is gone. The Jews of Sosnowitz had met the same fate as Bielitz and many other towns. His family members had either been shipped off to Auschwitz to die or had died, frozen to death in the meadow where they were forced to wait in the brutal winter. There were dead bodies of men, women, and children in the fields. Some parents had forced their children to take poison rather than face the horrors that awaited them at Auschwitz. Now Gerda is relieved that that she did not stay in Sosnowitz. She would have been shipped off to Auschwitz for certain death. Gerda still does not love Abek, but out of sympathy writes him a letter that she will marry him. She regrets writing the letter but feels she has to comfort him.

Newly arriving girls tell Gerda and the others that England is bombing German cities. They all pray that it is true. The Germans are facing serious odds on the Eastern Front, preventing among other things material from getting through to Bolkenhain. The looms are idle and the girls are assigned other duties. No one is allowed to write letters or receive them during this period. Any incoming letters are burned. Then inexplicably, mail is allowed again. Gerda and the others are more than curious as to what exactly is going on. In August 1943, the director has all the girls line up outside, divides them into three groups, and tells them that they would be leaving Bolkenhain.



## Part 2: Chapters 7 and 8

### Part 2: Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

Gerda and Ilse get to stay together and travel by truck to Marzdorf. Both girls are terrified. They see no allied bombers flying above as they journey on to their new location. They are greeted in Marzdorf by a blond woman who is wielding a bull whip. After their check-in, they are heralded off to their new quarters. The girls who are already encamped immediately start asking where they are from and if they might know their friends or relatives. After a fitful sleep, Gerda is awakened by the angry and profane words of Frau Aufsicht, who escorts the girls back and forth to work. The loathsome blond woman with the whip selects several girls to pull her around in a child's wagon, cracking the whip at their backs.

Gerda finds out why the flax detail is one that everyone dreads. Working at the depot, freight car after freight car arrives. Gerda and her group have to unload the heavy bundles of flax that are mounted three and four stories high. Just when Gerda tells Ilse she cannot take anymore, Director Keller from Bolkenhain appears and takes Ilse, Gerda, and some of their other friends with him to Landeshut. When they arrive, they are greeted by Frau Kugler, Mrs. Berger, Suse, and many of the other girls from Bolkenhain. Gerda and Ilse are overjoyed—they feel like they have come home. Frau Kugler tells them to get inside quickly!

Life at Landeshut is more difficult than at Bolkenhain, but on the bright side it is far better than that in Marzdorf. Gerda is working the 6pm to 7am shift. The plant supervisor is not very bright and is threatening with his "big stick." There is no mail privileges at Landeshut, so Gerda spends much time thinking about the welfare of her mother, father, and brother. Gerda thinks of the future and the importance of having a baby. She hears horrible rumors about Jewish girls being sterilized. Due to lack of nutrition, some of her friends have stopped having monthly periods.

Mrs. Berger summons Gerda to her office. She has a letter from Abek. After Gerda reads the letter, Mrs. Berger tells her that she will see him the next day. Frau Kugler had told Abek to cut himself so he could be taken to the nurse, Lotte. He then would be able to see Gerda. The next day, Gerda is waiting for Abek and sees him moving up the stairs. He is pale and thin and looks frail and weak. They embrace, but Abek appears hurt by Gerda's lack of emotion. Abek tells Gerda he volunteered to come to Burgberg so he would be close to her. Gerda feels guilty but cannot pretend to care more than she does.



## Part 2: Chapters 9 and 10

### Part 2: Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

Gerda learns that Abek gave up the relatively luxurious job of portrait painting to come to the camp near her. She feels very guilty and shows Abek as much love as possible, resigned to the fact that she will have to marry him even though she does not want to. Gerda and Ilse wait to see Abek each day, sneaking food to him when possible. Although Gerda tries to cheer him up, Abek is descending into deep depression. On May 6, 1944, Frau Kugler announces that the girls will all be moved from Landeshut to large concentration camps. They will be divided into two groups. The girls are terror-stricken.

Frau Kugler arranges for Gerda and Ilse to deliver laundry to Burgberg so that Gerda can tell Abek goodbye. On her twentieth birthday, Gerda is able to see the dreaded Burgberg for the first time. Not able to face him, Gerda writes Abek a good-bye note and leaves it with Dr. Goldstein to deliver. The next day the girls march out as Frau Kugler counts them before turning them over to the SS guards. Frau Kugler does not leave but stays with the girls until their train leaves. Frau Kugler is fighting tears as she tells Gerda to not forget her. Frau Kugler gives Gerda and the others hope that not all Germans are cruel.

Gerda and Ilse and some of their other friends are on the train heading for Grunberg. As they arrive in the area, the beautiful vineyard-covered setting is a false backdrop for the cruelty that awaits. The girls are checked in and led to their new quarters. Suse is already there and has met up with a friend from her town. She saved bunks for Gerda and Ilse. The conversation turns to the conditions at Grunberg. Gerda learns that the part of the camp that is most dangerous is the Spinnerei (the spinning room). The first day the girls are lined up for the director. The rumor is that he uses the large ring on his hand to enhance the beatings he gives the girls at the camp. The girls are allowed showers every two weeks. When Gerda is standing in the shower line, the director approaches the group and for apparently no reason selects one of the girls and beats her face unmercifully. Gerda is astonished as the director walks away with blood on his hands and the girl, without making a sound, just continues to stand in line.

Gerda and Ilse experience their first x-ray session. They are terrorized but their tests are both clear. They have another two months to relax before they have to worry about their next test. One of the girls that Gerda knows is sent to Auschwitz. Years later after the war, Gerda runs into the girl in Munich. She had escaped gassing by paying off one of the SS guards with some gems she had. Afterwards, the girl was checked by several doctors and was found to be free of TB. Had she not eluded the gas chamber, she would have been sent to her death for no reason.

Conditions are growing worse in Grunberg. Working hours are longer and more difficult, there is less food, and more girls are being transported to Auschwitz. One day someone





throws the girl in front of Gerda a piece of bread. A guard sees the girl pick up the bread and starts interrogating everyone around her. Gerda tells the guard she did not see who threw the bread. The guard beats Gerda and she returns to her bunk with a bloody and swollen face. It is now September 1944, five years since the Germans had taken Bielitz. Finally Gerda gets a measure of good luck. She and another girl are selected to log inventory into control books. The job is not easy since they have to lift heavy cartons, but it is a great improvement over the spinning room. To maintain her sanity, Gerda still holds onto the hope of reuniting with her family.



## Part 2: Chapters 11 and 12

### Part 2: Chapters 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

Toward the end of November, male and female German SS soldiers arrive at the complex and enter the housing quarters. The girls are lined up outside and are called into the building alphabetically. In tears, Ilse is called in before Gerda—both girls are terrified. Gerda is among the last to be called in. She is forced to undress and appear before the group of soldiers. She is given a number—895A—then dismissed and told to dress and return to her bunk. Ilse is there and the girls are glad to see one another. The rumor is that they will be used to satisfy the sexual desires of German soldiers. Gerda says she would rather go to Auschwitz. She trades a pendant she has hidden in her coat's hem for some poison for her and Ilse in case they need it.

Two weeks go by with no change to their status. But what does change are surrounding conditions. Air-raid alarms are increasing. The Germans seem fearful, with worried looks on their faces. Word gets back that the Russians now control Poland and that the US and England are advancing from the west. Is the war about to end? But would the timing be right? Jewish girls from another camp join Gerda and the others. Gerda hears that they could all be traveling to Oranienburg to be gassed. Would their lives be saved?

As they venture outdoors for their trip to the next camp, Gerda and her friends are stunned at the thousands of girls already lined up. They march all night and wind up in a barn. Gerda learns to guard her bread and her shoes, two items that are often stolen. The next day, they march on without anything to eat. Out of exhaustion, some girls lag behind. They are beaten, and if that does not motivate them, they are shot to death.

The girls are still marching and are cold and hungry. They are no longer fed and no longer counted. The guards cannot keep track of how many have died or been shot throughout the days and nights. Although she feels close to her death, Gerda is no longer able to pray. The girls march on for five days with no food. Gerda, along with a few other girls, are called out of line by a guard. Gerda thinks she will be shot but feels no fear. It would almost be a relief. Instead, she and the other girls are ordered to move the bodies of several dead girls who have just been shot. Gerda and the others then rejoin the line. Ilse is relieved to see her friend return. They are made to sleep in front of a church one night in the snow. Gerda keeps her friends awake all night, fearing that they will die if they fall asleep. They eat snow in the morning when they awake.

Finally, they arrive at Camp Christianstadt, where they are given warm food and are able to dry their clothes. They are given two warm meals per day and are mainly left alone. There is a spirit of optimism among the girls. They feel certain that the war and thus their misery is almost over. There are planes roaring above them and sounds of artillery all around them.

They reach the outskirts of Dresden. Air-raid sirens are blaring and hundreds of planes are flying toward the city. Houses are being bombed and people on fire are jumping in the River Elbe. Germany is under siege. Still the girls march on.

## Part 2: Chapters 13, 14 and 15

### Part 2: Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary and Analysis

The weather turns sharply colder as the girls march on. The girls have covered at least five hundred kilometers in the two months they have marched. They pass by many bombed out German cities, and finally arrive at Camp Helmbrechts. The girls are relieved to see that there are live people and no furnaces apparent at the camp. They are forced to strip to their shoes. Their clothes are replaced with still wet clothing that have been dipped in a solution said to kill vermin. The barracks have a dirt floor and the fence is equipped with electric wire. The food is meager and the beatings are frequent. More girls are dying off.

One night a girl that Gerda knew from Bolkenhain rouses Gerda from sleep. After a short time, Gerda can tell that the girl has lost her mind. But she tells Gerda that she has the spark to make other people happy. The poor girl is dead the next morning. But Gerda takes her last words to her to heart. She recalls how she created the plays that made everyone laugh at Bolkenhain. To keep up the girls' spirits even if it only lasts until they die, Gerda creates her own propaganda. She tells all the remaining girls that a reliable source has told her that they will soon be liberated, that the Allied Forces are on their way. The story is spread around and an almost visible lift is apparent among those marked for death.

One morning the girls are told they will be leaving Helmbrechts. When the girls assemble outside, the commandant cheerily tells them that the Fuhrer's greatest enemy has died—Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They march away from Helmbrechts in the rain. After another day's march, Ilse collapses and tells Gerda to leave her. She cannot walk anymore. Gerda refuses to leave Ilse and carries her to the sick wagon. Even though it is a danger to herself, Gerda rides in the wagon with Ilse. A few more days go by and Ilse's condition is declining rapidly. Gerda holds her hand as they sleep on the ground. When Gerda awakes, Ilse is dead. Gerda is frantic, but the others tell her that they will all be dead soon. Several other girls bury Ilse, as Gerda cannot bring herself to bury her best friend.

After Ilse dies, Suse and Liesel grow remote toward Gerda. The collective thought is that none of them will last much longer so there is no reason for emotional ties. Liesel and Suse declare themselves unable to walk any longer and take the wagon. Gerda starts to follow but another girl, Hanka, convinces her to walk. Another night in a barn and fifty more girls are dead in the morning. The girls overhear a guard say that Hitler is dead. Gerda is joyful but the others are fearful that they will be killed out of revenge.

The third day after Ilse's death, the girls arrive in Volary, Czechoslovakia. After being scared with a bomb and German soldiers, there is finally good news. A short while later, a Czech comes in and shouts for everyone to come out. The war is over!



## Part 3: Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 and Epilogue

### Part 3: Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The girls are overjoyed at their liberation. A US soldier, who turns out to be Gerda's future husband, Kurt Klein, tells Gerda that the Red Cross is setting up a hospital for them. At the hospital, Gerda takes a bath in warm water—her first bath in over three years. She is given new clothes and taken to a clean, warm bed. She is given her first glass of milk in three years. She begins to shake and convulse and a doctor is called in to tend to her. The doctor says to let her go. She is venting emotions that have been kept in for six years. The next day she feels like a fairy princess when she is served breakfast in bed. Doctors come by to document her personal information. She tells them her birthday is May 8th. They tell her "Happy Birthday", for the day is May 8th. It is her 21st birthday.

Gerda falls desperately ill with typhus and pneumonia. She is semiconscious for a week and wakes up feeling better when Kurt is standing there to say hello. However, her feet are suffering from frostbite and are not healing. Her doctor intimates that amputation might be necessary. Gerda will not allow that. Treatments are started the next day, soaking her feet in alternating hot and cold water. Finally, she begins to get feeling back in her feet and is certain she will be able to walk on them again. Gerda has great difficulty in learning to walk again. Gerda receives a letter from Kurt. A dried flower falls out of the envelope when she opens it. He had been quickly transferred to a town near Munich and was not allowed to write a civilian yet so he sent the letter through channels. He asks her to write him back. She is elated. She will have his letters to look forward to and perhaps she will soon see him in person.

Kurt wants her to move for her safety. She agrees to go to that region with a friend, Mala, who hails from Cham. After Gerda arrives there, she will decide her next move. Gerda bids the Knebels good-bye and her friends at the hospital. The doctor gives Gerda her discharge papers and payment for her help in the office. The pay was many more times the amount she earned. She was grateful for this kindness. She packs up her few belongings and prepares to move on.

One day Kurt tells Gerda that the war with Japan has ended. They celebrate and drink to peace with some anisette, the first alcohol Gerda had in her life. Kurt tells Gerda that he is to be sent home and that he wants her to come to America and be his wife. They decide that he will travel there first and send for her as soon as possible. It will be the fastest way to get her out of Germany and into their new life together.

Gerda and Kurt marry and move to the US. They have three children and many grandchildren. Gerda becomes a lecturer and author—her way of honoring and forever keeping alive the memory of her parents and brother and all her lost friends.



# Characters

## Gerda Weissmann Klein

Gerda Weissmann Klein is the author of the story, "All But My Life." The title refers to what the Germans took from Gerda. Gerda is a fifteen-year-old girl when the Germans invade her village of Bielitz, Poland. Gerda lives in Bielitz with her mother, father, and older brother. For two years, Gerda and her family are terrorized and stripped of their property and dignity. They are forced to give up their family home to Germans and move into the cellar. As the Nazis begin sending off the young men, Gerda has to face the departure of her beloved brother, Arthur. Arthur, who is four years her senior, is her idol. She has always looked to him for advice and support. Now, in the most harrowing time of her life, one that could have never been imagined, she depends on the words he told her before he left. She must be strong. She must stay true to herself.

Eventually, all the Jews in town including Gerda and her mother, Helene, and father, Julius, are to be transported to labor camps. As he stands on the back of the train, she sees a sickly man who was once a dignified businessman and wonderful father fading away in the horizon, reduced to the one word on his yellow star: "Jew." Although Gerda and Helene are at first assigned to the same camp, her mother is eventually selected for a camp known for its extermination facilities. Gerda is sent off with the other young women to a labor camp. Their parting is emotional with her mother telling her to be strong. Although she dreams of the day of her family's reunion, sadly Gerda never sees either parent or her brother again.

Once Gerda arrives at her first labor camp, she is selected for the weaving looms. The work is demanding, having to work up to four looms at once, and the hours are long—twelve or more per day. Gerda is usually able to stay with some of her friends from her home town, which makes her trial somewhat easier to bear. Her best friend, Ilse, is with Gerda from the time they leave Bielitz to just before liberation some four years later in Volary, Czechoslovakia. The girls at the camps have very little to eat, no health care, and cramped and unclean conditions in which to live. Vermin and lice are a constant in their lives. If any of the girls do not live up to the required level of productivity, they can expect beatings or worse. Gerda and the other girls all live in constant fear of being sent to Auschwitz or other such camps where the extermination of Jews openly takes place. Girls who become sick or injured are considered excess baggage and are routinely carted off to a death camp.

Gerda's spirit and the hope for a happy future help her survive the dreadful six-year experience—two years living in her village under occupation and four years in labor camps. When the Allied Forces begin to advance, Gerda and the other girls in her camp are forced to walk for months, some with no shoes. The girls are made to sleep exposed to the elements, sometimes sleeping in the cold. Finally, after Gerda reaches Volary, Czechoslovakia, the Allied Forces liberate the girls. Gerda's group started out with some four thousand girls and ended up with only 125 making it to Volary. When



Gerda opens the door to a US soldier, she weighs only sixty-seven pounds. That first US soldier she meets is Kurt Klein, who she winds up marrying a few years later. They move to the United States and have three children. Gerda becomes a lecturer and author, a way to honor and keep alive the memory of her family and the friends lost in one of the most horrendous experiences human beings ever had to face.

## **Kurt Klein**

Kurt Klein is the young Jewish American soldier who is part of the unit that liberates Gerda and those remaining girls in Volary, Czechoslovakia. Kurt and Gerda's story is truly one of love at first sight. He couldn't stay away from Gerda. The feelings were much more than superficial since Gerda could not have at first sight been a beauty. The very first time he sees his future wife, she is dirty, timid, and weighing all of sixty-seven pounds! They eventually marry and move to America. After Kurt's initial contact with Gerda, he returns and continues daily visits. Kurt tells her of his own sadness and the personal story of his family. Kurt was born in Germany. When Hitler took over, Kurt and his siblings went to America. His parents stayed behind thinking, that Hitler's regime would soon collapse. When it did not, Kurt and his siblings tried to get his parents out of Germany but were unable to do so. His last letter was returned to him unopened. He of course assumed like so many other Jews that his parents were dead.

Kurt becomes such a regular visitor to the Red Cross hospital that he becomes known as "Gerda's Lieutenant." Gerda is very ill with typhus and pneumonia and her feet were in such bad shape that amputation had been considered. Kurt stands by Gerda and helps to keep her spirits up through a long recovery. Even though Kurt has been through much emotional turmoil himself, he is able to lift Gerda's spirit through his humor and devotion. After a relatively short time of knowing one another, Kurt tells Gerda he is being transferred some miles away to a town near Dresden. Although they are separated for a while, Kurt visits whenever possible and stays in touch with her through the sporadic letters that make their way through the censors. For her safety, Kurt sends for Gerda to join him in Dresden.

Soon after Gerda arrives in Dresden, he proposes to Gerda. They travel through Paris and London on their way to the US. Kurt and Gerda marry and eventually have three children and later many grandchildren. The family that Kurt and Gerda have together is so important to them as it carries on ancestry of the beloved family members that they lost but never forgot so many years before.

## **Julius Weissman**

Julius Weissman is Gerda's fifty-five-year-old father. He is part-owner of a fur factory in Bielitz. The factory is taken over by the Germans. He is in ill health when the invasion begins. Julius is separate from his wife and Gerda and sent to a men's labor camp. Gerda never sees him again.





## Helene Weissmann

Helene Weissmann is Gerda's forty-five-year-old mother. Helene and Gerda stay together for a while after being separated from Julius. However, eventually Gerda and Helene are separated when Gerda goes with the young, healthy women and Helene is sent off to her death.

## Arthur Weissmann

Arthur Weissmann is Gerda's only sibling. He is four years older than she. Gerda looks up to Arthur and many of the supportive words he said to her gave her strength through her most trying times.

## Abek Feigenblatt

Abek Feigenblatt is Gerda's young suitor in Bielitz. Abek volunteers to be transported to one of the most notorious men's camp just to be near Gerda. Unfortunately, this move eventually leads to his death.

## Erika

Erika is a childhood friend of Gerda whose mother and little baby brother are vtaken in the middle of the night and slaughtered.

## Lotte

Lotte is a friend Gerda met at the Bokenhain labor camp. Lotte is the little girl who met her father for the first time when she was seven. Her parents reconciled and Lotte was overjoyed at the prospect of living with her mother and father. As she and her mother pack for their trip to join him in London, they get word that he died in a train wreck. Years later at the camp, Gerda sees her corpse dumped unceremoniously in a mass grave.

## Ilse

Ilse is Gerda's best friend through their ordeal after the Germans invaded Poland and took over their town of Bielitz. They are transferred from one women's camp to another. The war is nearing its end when the girls are forced to work for months to evade the emerging allied troops. Ilse is too weak to keep walking and dies from exhaustion, illness, and exposure.

## **Frau Kugler**

Frau Kugler is in charge of the girls at several camps where Gerda is sent. She is a kind woman with a good heart and helps Gerda and the others as much as she can. She is one of two Germans who were kind to Gerda during the occupation.



# Objects/Places

## **Bielitz, Poland**

Bielitz is the small village where the Weissmanns live when Poland is conquered by the Nazis.

## **Poland**

The country of Poland was conquered by the Germans in just eighteen days.

## **Krynica, Poland**

Krynica is an elegant summer resort where Gerda and her family enjoyed summer vacations before the invasion.

## **Sosnowitz, Poland**

Sosnowitz is the hometown of Abek Feigenblatt, Gerda's Bielitz suitor and the camp Gerda is taken to after she is separated from her parents.

## **Auschwitz**

Auschwitz is the dreaded city where the old and sick residents of Bielitz are sent to their deaths.

## **Bolkenhain, Germany**

Bolkenhain is the German city where the a new camp is erected. Gerda and Ilse and other young girls from Bielitz are sent here.

## **Marzdorf**

Marzdorf is the location of the women's camp where Gerda contemplated suicide to escape its horrible labor demands.

## **Landeshut**

Landeshut is the women's camp where Gerda sees her friend Abek for the first time since her encampment.



## **Zum Burgberg**

Zum Burgberg is the men's camp located near Landeshut, the camp where Gerda was sent to after leaving Marzdorf.

## **Volray, Czechoslovakia**

Volray, Czechoslovakia is the location of Gerda's liberation by the Allied Forces in May 1945. Volray is where she meets her future.



# Themes

## Strength of Character

Gerda's beloved older brother, Arthur, is to be transported to a male labor camp in the interior part of Poland. Before the sad departure from his family, he tells Gerda to "Stay strong." When Gerda's father, Julius, suspects his daughter is falling into a depression and considering suicide, he has her vow right then and there that she will never succumb to such a scenario. Gerda and her mother, Helene, wind up in a female labor camp. After a short while, they receive word that they are to be separated. Helene is to be transported off to a death camp while Gerda will be moved to another labor camp. As Helene is thrown in a truck, she yells to her daughter. The last words Gerda hears her mother speak are "Stay strong. Stay strong." Her parents could never believe that humans could treat other humans in such a shameless way. Of course, they found out the hard way that this conclusion was incorrect.

## Horrors of the Nazi Regime

After the invasion of the Germans in Gerda Weissmann's hometown of Bielitz, Poland, the range of terror, violations of human dignity, and torture is unthinkable to one leading a safe, normal life. Knowing that this horrendous chapter in human history was allowed to occur in the twentieth century is beyond unbelievable. The harrowing experiences the Jewish people had to endure would seem more fitting placed in barbarian times centuries ago. The Weissmann family, like untold Jewish families in Europe during the reign of the Third Reich, were at first stripped of their valuables, personal possessions and homes—later in many cases it was their lives.

Gerda's father, Julius, is a local businessman and part-owner of a factory in Bielitz. He is not well and his condition worsens when the family is forced to move out of their living quarters and into their damp cellar. Eventually, the family is torn apart, never to be reunited again. Gerda's beloved older brother is sent to labor camps in interior Poland and later to Russia. Her father is sent to another male camp. Gerda and her mother are sent at first to the same women's camp. Sadly, her mother is soon sent to a death camp and Gerda to yet another labor camp. Although Gerda holds out hope of a reunion, she is never to see her parents or brother again.

At the labor camps, young teen-aged girls are forced to "catch" large, heavy bales of flax thrown down carelessly to them by crane operators. Their young muscles are stretched beyond their development and their soft skin becomes sore and infected by the scratches inflicted by the raw material. Often times after working a twelve-hour shift of unloading bales, the girls then have to unload loads of coal. Gerda and other girls have to work four weaving looms at once and are warned to not let any of the machines malfunction at the risk a beating or worse. The girls are never given enough to eat, no health care, and living conditions considered sub-standard would be an upgrade for



them. When they have to march for months just prior to their liberation, the group of thousands of young girls dwindles to a mere 125 when they arrive in Czechoslovakia. Many of the girls die or are murdered along the way. Many have no shoes and suffer frostbite and face amputation after their liberation. Gerda sees one girl literally breaking off her toes that are brittle and beyond recovery from exposure to the elements.

## Survival

One of the most basic of human instincts is that of survival. No other story could showcase that characteristic more than the story of Gerda Weissmann Klein during her harrowing ordeal in German labor camps after the Nazi invasion of Poland. There are several times that the author, Gerda Klein herself, questions why the millions of Jews, her and her family among them, allowed their occupation and subsequent horrific plight to happen. Why didn't they fight back? Gerda's conclusion is that the Jews had faith in their fellow man. Humans could not treat other humans in such a shameless way. Of course, they found out the hard way that this conclusion was incorrect.

However, perhaps there was a stronger, more basic instinct at work in their defenseless concession of their lives and possessions. This inner voice spoke to a deeper part of their soul telling them there was something inhuman about the Nazis—that the hearts of normal human beings were absent. The surest way to survive therefore was to think of the German soldiers as more animal than human. Just as the hunter would try to keep the grizzly bear at bay, the captured Jews were on defense doing their best to survive their heartless captors. Perhaps these captors knew no better than animals. They had been taught from their youths that Jews were to be hated and destroyed. The Jews who survived did so with intelligence and dignity. This horrific black mark on history will never happen again. The world has the brave Jews to learn from. There is no doubt—the next time they would fight back.

Gerda and the young girls she shares this horrific experience with are faced with forced labor conditions that older, stronger men would have a problem dealing with. Gerda and the others are required to "catch" large bales of flax dropped nonchalantly from cranes by operators who had no mercy. At one point, Gerda was have to run four weaving machines with no allowance for mistake which expert weavers run at the most three at a time. The unfairness not to mention to terror and physical demands of Gerda's four-year labor camp experience would make most grown men give up. But the survival mechanism within Gerda somehow was never wiped away. Part of Gerda's strength came from within and part came from the memory of Gerda's parents and brother telling her to be strong and never give up.

# Style

## Perspective

All But My Life is the true story of the years Gerda Weissmann Klein endured after the invasion of her hometown, Bielitz, Poland. Written by the heroine herself, Gerda Weissmann Klein relates the harrowing tale of her life as a young Jewish girl in Nazi Poland who loses her family, friends, and home and is thrown in to a new life filled with terror and uncertainty. Although Gerda has to endure horrors no one living a normal life could even imagine, the strength of her spirit to survive is what ultimately saves her. The readers know the fears and thoughts she feels before being driven from her home along with her family members to labor camps around Europe. Gerda has much trepidation but is careful not to allow her parents to know of her concerns as she does not want anything to dampen what little spirit they may have left.

As one girlfriend after another dies from disease, torture, or blatant murder at the hands of their captors, Gerda displays a singleness of mind that is focused on survival. Although the deaths of her friends are tragic, Gerda, through her recollections, illustrates how a degree of emotional detachment from these harrowing incidents keeps her able to persist. Gerda is a very intelligent young woman and deep-down knows that her parents and brother must be dead. However, Gerda uses her creative nature to plan for and dream of the details of one-day reuniting with her beloved family. Being lost in her fantasies is far superior than existing in her current horrific life. Her dreams keep the horror at bay. The Nazis have control of her day to day life but they are powerless to stop her thoughts, dreams, and hopes.

What is the most amazing as that the story written from Gerda Weissmann Klein's point of view adheres to a clinical relation of this harrowing portion of Gerda's life. Even when she is relating the most emotional and horrific details of a friend's death or her father's humiliation, there is a detached remoteness that allows the segment to move the story along. Gerda Weissmann did not let her own emotions stand in the way of telling this gripping story. By so doing, she was paying respect to her family and friends by telling their stories as they happened, not colored by her own personal anger or anguish.

## Tone

What is striking is Gerda's spirit that peeks through even in the darkest hours of her experience. Gerda does not take the easy way out. She is cunning and bright, catching on quickly how to survive without compromising her core values and losing sight of herself and her hopes and dreams for a normal life. With all the sadness and terror and abuse that Gerda must endure, it is amazing that there is no hint of self-pity. Gerda keeps herself in a realistic mode while she endures the six long years of forced labor or better said, slavery. Although she feels sadness and pain for the fates of those around her, some her childhood friends from her home town, Gerda somehow keeps herself



detached in order to allow her healthy, internal instincts to guide her through the misery to ultimate survival.

Gerda displays a spirit and an intelligence that gets her through many a tough time. Although Gerda has deep-seated anger about the fate of herself and her family, that emotion is not the dominant tone of this harrowing tale. Rather, her focus stays on surviving and the dream of reuniting with her parents and her brother. Idle times finds Gerda fantasizing about their reunion at her childhood home in Bielitz, Germany. The very intelligent Gerda deep down knows that her dream will not come true but allows it to dominate the terror and anger that, once surfaced, would lead to her demise. By keeping her tone in a story-telling mode, Gerda allows the incidents to tell the story especially of her family and friends without interjecting her own anger and emotions.

Gerda ends the story with her new life in America. She is now a mother of three and a grandmother many times over. She loves America and is proud that her children are blessed to be born Americans. Gerda honors her beloved parents and brother through her lectures and books.

## Structure

The story is told in chronological order and covers roughly six years of Gerda Weissmann Klein's life during the Nazi invasion of Poland. The book is separated into three main parts with chapters within each major section. The concluding segment is an epilogue describing her current life.

The first part covers her life starting as a fifteen-year-old in her hometown of Bielitz, Poland. She is living happily with her parents and older brother when the Nazis invade the town. The Germans require the Jewish population of the town register with them. The Nazis take all the valuables and many personal belongings of the Jewish people. The Weissmanns are forced to give up their living quarters to Germans and to move to their cellar. The town is under occupation for two years when the Weissmanns get word that they will be sent to labor camps.

Part two covers the period of four years when Gerda is assigned to various Nazi labor camps. During this period, Gerda is enmeshed in hard labor working twelve-hour and sometime twenty-four-hour shifts. The harsh treatment and unreasonable labor demands upon the young girls caused many to suffer illness or injury. Many others were tortured, raped, sterilized, or murdered. As the Allied Forces advance into Germany and other occupied areas, Gerda is among a group of thousands of young girls who are forced to march toward Czechoslovakia. They march for months and finally arrive at Volray, Czechoslovakia, where the Allied Forces liberate them.

Part three is the story of Gerda's recovery and of the beginning of the rest of her life. The first US soldier Gerda encounters is Kurt Klein, who eventually becomes her husband. It seems to be love at first sight. Although Gerda was not at her most attractive—sick, dirty, and weighing sixty-seven pounds—Kurt could not seem to stay





away. Kurt makes Gerda laugh and keeps her focused on recovering. She has typhus, pneumonia, and frostbitten feet. After months, Gerda finally makes a full recovery. Kurt proposes and they eventually travel to the US and settle in Buffalo, New York. Gerda becomes a very happy American.

The book ends with an epilogue describing Gerda's life since moving to America with her husband, Kurt Klein. Gerda becomes a lecturer and author, an important way for her to honor and keep the alive the memory of her parents and brother and all the people who suffered so horrendously under the Nazi regime.



## Quotes

"Just after having lost her husband, Aunt Anna saw her nineteen-year-old son taken away. The men were lined up, and every tenth one was shot." p. 13

"You are lucky mother. If only I could be certain that someday my children would be standing on my grave." p. 22

"I was standing at my window, my forehead against the cold glass. It was late and I hadn't gone to bed. It seemed almost a luxury to die, to go to sleep and never wake up again." p. 32

"We tended some of the graves, specially those of soldiers and children. I had known so many, how old they had been, where they had come from, something of their lives. Escia and I spent many undisturbed hours amid beautiful flowers. The dead became our friends." p. 44

"He presented me with another book before he left. I found his picture between the pages and an underlined sentence which read, 'What the heart and even mind won't do, time will settle if given a chance.'" p. 66

"I wish they would kill me. From now on I will walk wherever it is not permitted. I want them to catch me. I want them to kill me because I don't care. There is only one thing that could stir within me. I want a gun. I want a knife. I want to kill, just kill. I have no feeling. It won't be a crime. Maybe it won't even give me satisfaction, but I want to kill." p. 70

"A bird fluttered in the branches above me. Somewhere a dog barked. I embraced the twisted branch and kissed its rough wet bark. 'Good-by, good-by,' I murmured." p. 76

"She asked me to sleep with her in Papa's bed. I was half asleep when I felt her arms around me, clinging to me in desperation. All my life I shall be sorry that I did not feel more tender that night. When Mama needed me most I wanted to be alone. I pulled away like a wounded animal that wants to lick its wounds in peace. Finally I feel asleep—on a pillow soaked with my mothers' tears." p. 88



"Why did we walk deliberately and obediently into their clutches? . . . Because we had faith in humanity. Because we did not really think that human beings were capable of committing such crimes." p. 89

"I saw Lotte's corpse thrown into a hastily dug mass grave: her glasses gone, her eyes half-open, a sad smile on her lips. I saw the frozen earth thrown onto her. That was Lotte. I cannot help but want to tell her story, for I might be the only one left in the world who knows it." p. 130

"I sought opportunities to see him and dreaded the moment that I would have to face him. I was sure now that I would marry him, although I did not want to. Yet I was comforted by the knowledge that through that long and frightful winter he never doubted my love for an instant." p. 163

"Everywhere we left some dead. Some we buried, others we simply left. Hundreds of girls had frozen feet, bloody and full of pus. I saw one girl break off her toes as though they were brittle wood." p. 191

"You will rejoice to hear that the greatest enemy of the Fuhrer is dead. Franklin Delano Roosevelt has died—as all enemies of the Fuhrer will die." p. 200

"I love this country as only one who has been homeless for so long can understand. I love it with a possessive fierceness that excuses its inadequacies, because I deeply want to belong. And I am still fearful of rejection, feeling I have no right to criticize, only an obligation to help correct. I marvel at my three children's total acceptance of their birthright and rejoice in their good fortune." p. 248



## Topics for Discussion

What type of business did Gerda's father own in Bielitz? Who was his partner and what happened to this business once the Germans invaded the town?

What did Gerda and her mother do to make money after they were forced to move to their cellar? How did they prefer to be paid for their work and why?

The Jewish people were forced to sew symbols onto their clothing. Describe this symbol and the purpose it served for the Germans.

What gift do Gerda's parents give her for her sixteenth birthday? How does she react and what is the significance of this gift?

Describe the relationship between Gerda and her suitor, Abek. What are Gerda's true feelings for him? Why does she feel guilty about those feelings? What happens to Abek?

Who is Frau Kugler? What position does she have and what role does she play in Gerda's encampment? What are Gerda's feelings about Frau Kugler?

Under what circumstances does Gerda meet her future husband, Kurt Klein? Describe the development and different aspects of their relationship.