

GERDA WEISSMAN KLEIN  
BORN 1924  
BIELITZ, POLAND

Gerda Weissman Klein was born in 1924 in Bielitz (now Bielsko - Biala), Poland, near the Czech border. The tape shows photographs of her father (about 1938, mother (about 1939), one older brother (about 1937), her future husband, Kurt Klein (during the war) and of herself after liberation. She had a good and normal childhood and went to a Catholic school where a rabbi gave Jewish instruction. When Hitler annexed Czechoslovakia, many people fled to Poland but were optimistic that nothing would happen to them. Her father had training as a physician but had to go into the army in World War I, he never practiced and later went into her grandfather's business.

At the beginning of the war, the Nazis first appeared in her hometown on September 2, 1939. They treated the Jews and Polish civilians very badly, but once Great Britain and France entered the war, no further escape was possible. Also, further schooling was impossible, and all money was confiscated. They managed by selling their possessions and she and her mother knitted sweaters. One sweater could be exchanged for one loaf of bread. People lived in the basement of their homes. In October, all younger men, including her brother were taken away. Her brother escaped by swimming across the rivers to Russian territory, and she had contact with him until 1942 when he disappeared. His fate is not known.

Then, all the Jews had to move into one part of the town which became the ghetto, and they had to wear the yellow star. She and her mother were sewing uniforms in a German shop. Her father was ill, he had a light heart attack in 1939. They had little news from the outside, but neighbors helped each other.

In June 1942, her father was taken away to work on some fortifications. She was separated from her mother on June 29, 1942 who was sent to Auschwitz, but she declined to talk about it. Her father had asked her to wear her ski boots where she hid photographs. She did this for three years, even in summer, and this probably saved her life,

Then, she was sent to a transit camp for girls, about 16 to 28 years old, in nearby Sosnowiec (about 10 miles north of Auschwitz) where industrialists from all over Germany came to "buy slaves." Bielitz was an important textile center. German speaking girls were taken to textile factories, and she worked at a weaving center. Those who could not keep up a high performance were sent to Auschwitz.

This went on for three years during which time she also worked in quarries or laid bricks. Later, she ended up at a spinning mill where there was a lot of dust and TB. The girls were X-rayed every 6 to 7 weeks and if they were found not healthy, they were sent to Auschwitz. There was only little food and they had a half-day off sometimes on Sunday. For ten months, they worked mostly on night shift without light and had cruel overseers. Progress of the war could be judged from the treatment received. In January 1945, about 2000 girls had to leave the camp and with another 2000 girls were marched away with little food. Four months later, only 120 were still alive. Girls who would hide during the night were turned in by the local population to be killed, until they got into Czechoslovakia where people urged them to flee and some actually helped. Her best friend died one day before the end of the war but made her promise to hold on for one more week. After the end of the war, the soldiers locked the girls into a barn with a time bomb and fled in civilian clothes. Heavy rain prevented the bomb explosion, and they were released by Czech people. Then, two American soldiers arrived and looked for girls who could speak English or German. One of these was her future husband Kurt Klein whose job it was to negotiate the surrenders of towns. On the tape, he comments on the horrible conditions of the girls many of whom died after liberation. Gerda was in the hospital for several months, and her weight was down to 68 pounds. Neither her parents nor other members of her family survived. Kurt was discharged in September 1945 and they were married in France in 1946.

Her children have been aware of these events all along, and this seems to have worked well. Gerda and Kurt feel that the story must be told without fear to remember to be vigilant of liberty and to reach out and help others. It is important to learn how people in the camps helped each other to survive. She emphasized the expressions of love and friendship in the camps and that, in spite of all the horrors, there were no suicides. Her final quote is "The darker the night, the brighter the dawn."