

[MUSIC PLAYING] Today, Gerda Weissmann Klein, who survived the Nazi slave labor camps, the concentration camps, and a 1,000-mile death March from Bielitz, Poland to Volary, Czechoslovakia, lives with her husband, Kurt Klein, and three children in Kenmore New York. She is the author of *All But My Life*, a personal account of the tragedy that struck her family when the German Army marched into her hometown, Bielitz, Poland in September 3, 1939.

Gerda was 16 at the time and ready and yearning for the good times that every teenage girl wishes to enjoy. But circumstances beyond her control shattered her life. As Gerda stated, Mama was 45. Papa was 55. Both were too young to die but too old for more suffering. Her mother and father and brother were killed in the German concentration camps.

In her book, she explains why the victims of the concentration camps marched obediently-- Gerda's words-- "like meek sheep to the slaughterhouse." She says, "We did not believe that human beings were capable of committing such crimes. But here are the facts. In that six-year period, from 1939 to 1945, the Earth absorbed the blood and bones and dreams of millions of innocent people."

[DRUMS BEATING]

Gerda Weissmann Klein survived the war, the horror of the Earth, as she so eloquently stated in her book, and is here today to share some of her memories and insights that none of us should ever forget. Gerda.

Thank you. Thank you very much for inviting me and for your interest in this dark chapter of human history. I feel particularly moved that young people are interested in it because I feel, through the interest, I hope and pray that it will prevent it from ever happening again to any people anywhere.

You asked me to talk a bit about my life, some of the memories of the Holocaust. And, you know, the Holocaust usually is remembered only for its darkness, its horrors, man's inhumanity to man. And of course, though everything you have read and heard, no matter how incredible, is true, I still feel that perhaps another, and to me most important, dimension is missing, and that is the understanding of the humanity which also lived in the camps, the love, and beauty, and sharing, and friendship.

And I know that you have been so very familiar with all about my life and quoted from it so eloquently. I feel that I would like perhaps to deepen it by speaking about Ilse. Whenever I share my thoughts with young people, of course, Ilse comes very vividly into my life because she is the one who shared my childhood, my young girlhood. And I feel that if I talk about her, especially to young people, somehow I feel that she is not forgotten. For those who are not familiar with Ilse's life and the beauty of her life, I would like to say that Ilse and I grew up together, and our mothers were close friends.

Whenever my mother would visit hers, she would usually ask me to come along and play with Ilse. Unfortunately, my mother knew little of child psychology, so she usually told me what a well-behaved nice good little girl Ilse was. Predictably, I never wanted to play with that paragon of virtue. But when we were together, we always managed to have a nice time.

Ilse was a very gifted girl. She was sent to Vienna to study at the conservatory of music when she was about 11 or 12. After that I saw, of course, much less of her until the war broke out. And that's when she came home. We became very close. When we were separated from our parents to be sold, as you know, on the slave markets of Germany to a succession of slave labor and concentration camps, we became to each other the only family we had.

Ilse left me a legacy of many memories, one of two unforgettable gifts. The first was a raspberry, which she once found in the gutter on the way to the factory, which she carried in her pocket all day long, God only knows against what temptation, to present it to me that night on a leaf, which she plucked through the barbed wire. I wonder if one can conceive of a world in which one single dust-covered raspberry becomes one's total possession, and to give this treasure to a friend.

The tragedy, of course, is that Ilse never tasted another esprit again, for she died in my arms on a wet meadow in

Czechoslovakia. She was 18 years old.

In the last bitter hour of a young unfulfilled life, she gave me the greatest gift of all, the gift of my own life. Do you recall, she asked me to promise her to go on for one more week. A week in those days was a very long time. A week later, exactly to the day, perhaps to the very hour of her death, we were liberated by American forces. I faced liberation day with two promises kept, one given to Ilse just a week earlier, the other one given to my father more than three years earlier, when on a hot day in June, as I last saw my father June 20, he suddenly asked me where my skiing boots were.

I remember questioning it. Of course, it was very hot, and I probably would have walked away in a pair of sandals. But my father said he wanted me to wear them. And you know, one didn't argue with one's father in those days. So I put on the skiing boots. I wore them for three years in every season. They were instrumental in not only saving my life on this winter's march. But in them also I carried the pictures of my parents and my brother, which you showed before.

Now, liberation day occurred in a small, obscure village in Czechoslovakia, where the march came to a halt. Of the 4,000 who started, only 120 were left. I survived. Ilse did not. We were liberated by American forces. And as you know, the first young American officer who entered our camp as liberators is now my husband.

You know, I know that patriotism of late has not been a fashionable emotion. But I'm not ashamed to admit that, even after more than 30 years, the sight of the Stars and Stripes going up to a mast still evokes a feeling of incredible joy to me. And I always want to remember it. And I want to remember what it felt like to see it going up a mast once the swastika has flown for six years.

I feel very strongly that our people, our young people, should take enormous pride in the achievements of the past. And I know that perhaps some criticism is always due of other things that young people don't agree with. But I feel it's important to learn and to build on the achievements and mistakes of the past, and above all, to be terribly vigilant of human freedom.

You see, Hitler was voted to power either by those who voted for him or those too complacent to vote against him. I remember my parents, when discussing Hitler, that maniac Hitler, as he was usually referred to, usually said it couldn't possibly happen here. After all, this was a civilized country. This was not in medieval times. They said, such things as people say that Hitler said he's going to do, nobody believed in it.

I think we-- we have to be terribly cognizant of freedom, understand freedom. You know, to most people freedom is just a word. And to me, freedom is like the air. We breathe the air in and out without giving it much thought. But if we are deprived of air for a little while, it becomes the most precious commodity. This is the thing we want most, to take but another breath.

This is what freedom is to me. And I feel that we ought to learn to appreciate it and to see that freedom is granted to all people everywhere. I think this is something that is extremely important to me.

At some time, you may have to fight for it.

Indeed, you do. You always have to fight for the things which are right.

Well, thank you very much, Gerda. I wonder now, we have some time, and I'd like to ask you some of the questions that my students gave me for this program. The first one is this-- why and when did you decide to write this book?

Well, you know, I had always written, even as a child and as a young girl in school. And it was only natural for me to want to write the memories of the war and also to write it as a legacy my children. I started writing it right after the war. But then I left it and wrote it again a few years before publication.

OK. How did you get to the United States, Gerda, with your husband, or did you come alone? Were you married in this country or in Europe?

No, my husband had to come to the United States to get discharged from the army. He came back. We were married in Paris. And then I came with him in 1946.

OK. Did you keep the ski boots that your father told you to wear? The students were very curious about that because they played such an important part in your life.

No, unfortunately not. When I was confined to the hospital right after liberation, all clothing as well as the boots were destroyed because we had typhoid. And of course, it was a highly contagious disease. Everything was destroyed.

The boots had to go too.

The boots too-- only the pictures I kept.

Gerda, another thing that the students wondered about, how did you maintain your courage and strength and sanity through these six years? This is truly a marvel.

No, it really isn't. And I'm awfully glad that that question came up because, you know, I think people are always afraid. How would I ever cope with anything that is larger than I? And I think that fear is probably in every heart. And here's something that I don't think most people are aware of. The last camp I was in, we were 2,000 girls before the additional transport of 2,000 was added. You know, they came from Auschwitz.

Now, you had 2,000 girls from every socioeconomic background, every level of intelligence and education, just everyone. We were always hungry and were, most of the time, cold or very hot. Outside the camp was surrounded by barbed wire, which was electrically charged. Yet, through my entire stay in the camps, which was a little over three years, I know of not one case of suicide or one nervous breakdown.

Did those words help you that your mother said to you and, of course, Arthur said? Mama said, Gerda, be strong. Did these words kind of--

Yes.

--come to you often?

Very often. And I think it probably held true for everyone. But I think it is very important for, especially young people, to remember that life is the most precious of all possessions. And it must never be given up easily. It's-- when it gets very, very dark, this is when dawn is brightest.

And you had to be a fighter, really, from the very beginning.

I know everyone felt that way. You see, the people who didn't survive just didn't have a chance. But I don't know of anyone who did not want to live.

Yes. I recall the night that you mentioned that you were working in the weaving factory in the daytime and the coal yards at night. And that at times you felt that suicide was the only thing, but you-- but you didn't.

I'm sure glad I didn't.

I'm glad you didn't too. Another question is, were there any good Germans? Now, I recalled a policeman that talked to you when you were learning English and he said--

You forget English.

--go home and forget English. Were there other good Germans that you can remember.

Yes. There was Mrs. Kugler-- I wrote about her-- who was in charge of us in the first camp, who was humane, who treated us fairly. I'm deeply indebted to her, and I wrote about her, if you recall. And I think by her very example, she showed that orders could be interpreted, because so many people said they just followed orders. And I'm glad she interpreted hers in a humane way.

Well, that's nice to hear. How do you have-- or do you have everything that you wish now, as far as happiness goes? The students wanted me to ask that question because they hope that you do have.

I would say that I have far more than I ever dreamed is possible. I think to have a family and to be healthy and to live in freedom, above all, is more than one can expect who has been where I have been.

Right. The last question now, Gerda, is this-- what memories do you have of the happy times with your parents, with Papa, Mama, and Arthur? I was so-- it felt so good when I read some of those passages, the warmth and the beauty of your writing. And it seems that you must have many wonderful memories. What are some of those memories?

I do. I have many, many memories, and they were the sustaining force throughout the war. But there is one which really became, I suppose, the very source of survival, and I would like to share it with you. And that is the memory of an evening at home, the living room of my childhood, the way the lamps threw a glow against the walls, my father smoking his pipe and reading the evening paper, my mother working at her needlepoint, Arthur and I doing our homework. I remember once in Bolkenhain, standing at a barbed wire window and thinking, if somebody, some magic, would give me one wish that I want more than anything in the world, what would I want most? To be beautiful, to be famous, to be rich, what does one want?

And what I saw was precisely the frame of this one picture. And I thought to myself, those were the evenings I used to take for granted. I thought, you know, a boring evening at home, they would all go on like this forever. And I think the beauty of, the simplicity of that, I think, is the most treasured thing. And I think, in some ways, and I hope it's always going to be with me like that, that I don't believe that the meaning of life is-- the true meaning of life is to be found in the heights of achievement or success or maybe publication parties or great things or in the depths of tragedy and pain to which I'm also no stranger. I don't think that this is the meaning of life. The meaning of life can be found in those simple, boring, repetitious they called every day.

Yes. I recall that, in your story, you mentioned walking in the cemetery, when you wanted to enjoy the beauty of nature in Bielitz. I suppose those days come back too.

There was no other place to go. But the beauty of nature can be found anyplace. And I think that's very important. I also remember once a flower poking its head through the debris in a corner of the camp and how much joy that flower gave us. One single flower became a very important part of those days and nights to enjoy that moment of beauty. Now, you know, I don't mean to suggest a stay in a concentration camp for an appreciation of art and beauty. But I think at times we should remove ourselves from where we are, and perhaps by walking home once in the afternoon, to just see the eyes-- through the eyes of someone who is homeless or hungry, to see what one's life contains not what's missing.

You know, we all tend to see what isn't there or look for it but rarely appreciate the things which we have, which really are the foundation of everything that people who are homeless dream about.

The simple things.

This is a very special moment. And I would like to take it to thank Mr. Hall for having been in the Liberation Army, for fighting for freedom and for the ideals which we believed in, for remembering still, for you have seen the places, you have been in the places in which I have been, and for remembering after so many years and teaching it to the new generations so that I'm sure I join you in the hope and prayer that in their lives a book like All About My Life will never be written again as autobiography. I want to thank you for caring then and for caring now.

It's my pleasure, Gerda. Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to be with us today. It is our fervent prayer that the men and women of the world have had enough of war. It is our sincere hope that never again will

countries waste lives and the precious resources of the Earth in war. It is time for all the people of the world to join hands, work together in peace, and build and beautify with the Earth's resources, for Earth is the only home we have.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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