All But My Life by Gerda Weismann Klein

All But My Life is Gerda Weismann Klein’s memoir of her experiences during World War II. Klein was born on May 8, 1924, in Bielitz (now Bielsko), Poland. She remembers her childhood as being happy, even idyllic. The Weismanns were a Jewish family, and their town had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1919. Like most of the residents in the area, the Weismann family was bilingual, speaking both Polish and German, and Klein’s older brother, Arthur, studied English as well. Klein’s father, Julius, was a business executive who had lived in Bielitz for more than twenty years, and Helene, her mother, was born there, as were both Klein and Arthur. The family was horrified when German Nazi forces invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Despite the fact that Britain and the United States declared war on Germany two days later, it took the Nazis only eighteen days to conquer Poland.

Soon afterward, the entire Jewish population of Bielitz was forced to register with the police, and soon, sanctions were imposed against the Jews. First, they were required to turn in all gold, automobiles, bicycles, and radios. Many Jews were forced out of their homes, and the local temple was burned down. In October of 1939, all Jewish men between the ages of sixteen and fifty were forced to register, whereupon they were sent in cattle cars to rebuild parts of Poland that had been destroyed by Allied attacks. Klein’s brother was sent to the interior of Poland in one of these transports. In December, the Weismann family was forced to move into the basement of their home, while the woman who had been their laundress took over the main house. After Christmas, the Nazis restricted the local Jewish population’s food supply by stamping their ration cards with the word “JEW,” entitling them to less than half the amount of food that non-Jews received. Their coal rations were also cut, and they were forced to wear blue and white armbands and, later, yellow stars that identified them as Jews.

Before the war began, Bielitz had a Jewish population of nearly 8,000 people. As news of the German treatment of Jews reached them, however, more and more Jews fled to the Russian-occupied parts of Poland that had not been claimed during the German takeover. By the spring of 1940, the Jewish population in Bielitz had dwindled to little more than three hundred people, most of them children and the elderly. Like Klein’s brother, all of the young men had left in the transports. The young female population was declining as well, as more and more families left or sent their children out of the country. On April 19, 1942, all of the remaining Jews in Bielitz were ordered to move into a newly constructed Jewish ghetto. In May of 1942, shortly after Klein’s eighteenth birthday, all Jews were required to register for work. Those who did not comply were sent to Auschwitz, a nearby concentration camp intended to enable the Nazis to kill those people who were deemed not useful to the German cause. Soon, the Weismann family was told that they would be sent to camps in order to make Bielitz Judenrein—free of Jews. Klein’s father and mother were taken to death camps, where they were killed, along with one to three million others.

Poland was the center of the Jewish Holocaust, and Auschwitz, Treblinka, Belzec, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Birkenau, the infamous concentration camps, were all located there. The survival rate for Jews living in Poland during the war was lower than in any other country. Poland’s Jewish population dropped from 3,500,000 to just 50,000 by the end of the war. At the same time that her parents were taken to Auschwitz, Klein and many other young Polish people were taken to labor camps, where they became slaves forced to work for the German war effort. As it became obvious that Germany was losing the war, the Germans started dismantling the camps and forcing the prisoners onto marches that became known as “death marches” because of their extremely high mortality rate. In the winter of 1945, more than four thousand young women were forced onto a three-hundred-mile “death march” from a number of labor camps in Germany and Poland to Czechoslovakia. Among them was Gerda Weismann Klein—one of only 120 women in her group of 2,000 who survived this march. Klein and the other women were liberated by American troops—including one soldier who eventually became Klein’s husband in the spring of 1945.

All But My Life is Klein’s memoir of the period from September 3, 1939, two days after the Nazi invasion of Poland, until September of 1945. In 1946, Klein moved to Buffalo, New York, with her husband, Kurt Klein, where she began working to raise awareness about the Holocaust, prevent hunger, and promote tolerance. She quickly formed ties with a number of Jewish groups and began lecturing about her experiences as a young woman during the Holocaust. First published in 1957, Klein’s story was the basis
for the Academy Award-winning documentary *One Survivor Remembers*. Klein also went on to write a number of other books, including a collection of her correspondence with her then-fiancé, Kurt Klein, before their marriage in 1946.

*All But My Life* is just one of many memoirs written in the decades immediately following the end of World War II. In 1995 the memoir was revised and re-released with an epilogue describing Klein’s post-war life.

**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” Nania 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 Judenalteste and Lagerfuhrerin differ from their counter parts 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?