**One Survivor Remembers**

**Link to watch actual video:**

<http://www.ushmm.org/remember/days-of-remembrance/resources/one-survivor-remembers>

**or**

<http://www.tolerance.org/kit/one-survivor-remembers>

**Transcript of Video**

**Narrator:**  
During the final days of World War II, in the hills of southern Czechoslovakia, U.S. Army cameras recorded the aftermath of a little-known Nazi atrocity. American troops had come upon the bodies of young women who had been killed during the final stages of a three-month death march.

Of the 2,000 women who began the march, fewer than 150 would survive to be liberated. For each of the survivors, liberation would mark the end of a six-year nightmare through ghettos, deportations, slave-labor camps, and forced marches. These are the memories of one of those survivors.

**Gerda Weissmann:**  
I was the only one from my family who survived. The only one of my dearest friends.

**Narrator:**  
In August 1939, 15-year-old Gerda Weissmann returned from a summer vacation to her family home in Bielsko, Poland. She was to begin school within a few weeks. On September 1, World War II began with the German invasion of Poland. Within hours, the peaceful city of Bielsko was overtaken by the German army.

**Gerda Weissmann:**  
We were sitting at breakfast. It was a beautiful, beautiful autumn day—very bright, very golden. We were all together, and it seemed all activity outside has stopped as well. And it was sort of a very, very special, memorable day because it had no...no intrusion whatsoever.

Then, in the evening, a great deal of activity started. There was shooting, there were planes, there were some explosions. We went to the basement. My cat was outside, and my brother went out to let the cat in; the cat was meowing. And he came back with a hole in his trousers. And he said there was shooting from the rooftops, and the Germans were coming.

And at that moment, we heard an incredible roar, and a motorcycle came down the street, and it had a sidecar, and there were people in different uniforms. You know, our army, the Polish army, had sort of beige-khaki uniforms, and those uniforms were green. People were shouting, you know, "Heil Hitler! Long live the Führer!" And people were waving flags with swastikas. There was a feeling of complete betrayal. Suddenly, you were home—and you were not home anymore.

[Text on screen] Gerda Weissmann’s brother Arthur was 19 years old. He was a student of chemistry at the local technical college.

He was really my hero. Very accomplished in everything he touched, he seemed to be able to do well. And he was a wonderful brother. He always protected me. And, of course, he had his friends coming to the house. So there were boys around, you know. I started to get interested in boys. And a lot of my friends were seeking my friendship because of my brother.

[Text on screen] Within weeks of the invasion, the able-bodied Jewish men of Bielsko were ordered to register for forced labor.

Unfortunately, pretty soon orders came for all young men to register, between 16 and 50. And...  
And they were taken away. The last day before Arthur left—as a matter of fact the night before—I went to his room. And when I was little, I used to always go, and he would read me stories, and then he would throw me out of his room. But apparently he didn't that night. I must have fallen asleep at the foot of his bed. When he left, he asked me to be strong and to look after my parents. My mother didn't make his bed for a very long time for the imprint of his head. I guess the loss of my brother is the hardest one to bear.

[Text on screen] Many ethnic Germans living in Bielsko welcomed the German invasion and were given the homes of displaced Jewish families. The Weissmans were confined to the basement of their home.

The war started in September. By Christmas, we had to move to the basement of our home. It was very cold and clammy. We had no running water, no electricity, and things were really quite bad, but we were still in our own home. And spring was very difficult because I always loved my garden. I used to spend a lot of time there as a child. And a sign appeared there that dogs and Jews were not permitted to enter. I remember I said, "I don't care what they're going to do. I have to see my garden again." It was a beautiful and fragrant spring morning. It was in April. And I remember I jumped over the fence and went to the garden and pretended that I was just picking violets. I could see from the garden the room which had been mine, the wallpaper. Even though we lived in the basement, I was still there. And I pretended just for a little bit what it would be like if the war hadn't happened. I would be going in, my mother would say I need to take my raincoat to school, and my brother would be hurrying off. My father would be going to his office. My mother would be setting the table for breakfast and urging us to do this or that. And I remember it was sort of the most incredible thing that the reality, which I had always taken for granted, now became the most remote fantasy.

[Text on screen] In 1942, Polish Jews were deported to slave labor, concentration camps, and killing centers.

The worst day of my life: the 28th of June, '42. That is when I saw my father for the last time. The day before, we were… I… I heard my parents—of course, you know, we all lived in one room—and I heard my parents talk through the night. And I still cannot comprehend their incredible bravery. They spoke only of their lives together, their love, the good times, their children, their parents. And with that, they faced the morning. After my father left, my poor mother, you know, I remember I begged her to have something to eat, and she wouldn't. But she had also…saved from before the war a bit of cocoa and…and some jam. And she decided to make that cocoa for me that morning. I remember all those years looking at that cocoa with great longing—we didn't have any throughout—but it didn't taste particularly sweet on that morning.

[Text on screen] On June, 29, 1942, the Jewish women of Bielsko and their children were deported by the German authorities.

We had to march through our town. And…I guess it is sort of a similar journey than a journey to execution when I think of it now, because, you know, you saw people looking out from behind curtains, some waving sort of a mute farewell. Seeing somebody was painting a new sign on a shop. The movie was putting a new feature on the marquee, and we were marching.

There was an SS man there that was near the railroad tracks where the circus used to come. It was sort of an empty place. I was with my mother and a number of my friends as well, with their mothers. And we heard that Merin was there. Merin was a man of—if the stories were to be believed—not anyone to be greatly admired. He was working with the government there. He was standing to the side. We had to form a line, and an SS man stood there with a little stick. And I was holding hands with my mother, I came up to him, and he looked at me, and he says, "How old?" I said, "18," and he sort of pushed me to one side and my mother to the other side. I wasn't aware what was happening at that particular point, but shortly thereafter, when I stood with my other friends who were also separated from their mothers, we realized that we were going to go to separate places. There was an enclosure, an enclosure there, with barbed wire to the right where our mothers were, and we were immediately taken to the left. Now, again, I don't remember the time sequence at all. I just remember the tremendous panic. And shortly thereafter, some trucks arrived, open trucks, with sort of a gate behind it, and we were loaded on the truck. And I heard my mother's voice from very far ask, "Where to?" And I shouted back, "I don't know." And I guess I must have been aware that I was taken away from my mother, so I jumped off. And Merin came. And he was very slight, a small man. I didn't expect such strength from him. And he picked me up bodily, and he threw me on the truck, and he says, "You are too young to die." And I guess the trucks were set in motion. I just heard my mother's voice, and it came like an echo, and she was saying, "Be strong." You know, "Sei stark," in German. And then the trucks rolled out of there, and, ironically, the sun came out, sort of. I still see it, the rooftops looked wet, illuminated by the sun, and the church bells ringing, and that was the last view.

We were taken to a train. And, of course, I was with my friends, and I think we all started to talking and facing the reality of what was probably happening. And I had a friend by the name of Ilse Kleinzähler. I'd known Ilse since childhood. Ilse was a little younger than I, and we looked quite a bit alike, and people took us as sisters. And, as a matter of fact, Ilse had a horrible headache on the train, and she said, "Oh, if somebody would just have an aspirin or something." And there was this really stunning, beautiful, tall, slim, redheaded girl, very friendly face, and she said, "Oh, I have one," and she gave it to me, and I gave it to Ilse. And she introduced herself in sort of a very open manner, and she said, "My name is Suse Kunz." And, of course, I told her mine, and we started talking. And the windows of the train were open. It was a beautiful summer day, and we said, "Won't it be fun when we make the journey back?" And we were sort of looking back and forth, and she said, "That war is going to go on for a long time," and I said, "No, it won't." And she said, "It's going to be years." I said, "No, it's going to be less than six months." And she said, "I wouldn't bet on that." And I said, "I would." And we made a bet and shook hands on that. And the bet was for a quart of strawberries and some whipped cream, to be payable after the war. I lost that bet.

[Text on screen] Gerda Weissmann was deported to a slave labor factory that produced fabric for the German military.

The camp we came to was a small town called Bolkenhain. I remember we were marched from the railroad station. People looked very curiously at us. We came to an enclosure adjacent to a factory which had a couple…a barrack, and it was a tremendous click as the gates closed, sort of that finality. And there stood a woman clad all in black, and she was literally barking. I've never heard a human voice being that harsh. She looked like a bulldog, you know. And I said, "This is going to be absolutely the worst." We were supposed to refer to her as Frau Kügler. She turned out to be the hope, the inspiration, and the knowledge that perhaps not all Germans were cruel. She was a decent, wonderful, warm, caring human being. No doubt she was picked for her position because of her looks, but the looks completely belied what was underneath it all.

We stayed in that camp for a little over a year. No one was sent to Auschwitz. I don't know if she particularly loved us, but she pinned a lie to the lips of all those who said they had no choice. I personally am indebted to her for my own life at one point, when this infamous Lindner, who was known for his cruelty, swooped down for an inspection of the camp. And I had been very ill at the time—I was running a very high fever—and I was permitted to stay in my bunk. And she came in—there were two, no, there were three of us who were ill—and she came and she said, "Girls, get yourself together." I remember she stooped down to tie my boots, and she literally dragged me and the two other girls to the factory. And she set my looms in motion, and she said, "Pull yourself together. This is life or death today."

[Text on screen] Gerda Weissmann would spend three years in camps along the Polish-german border. For Gerda, the conditions of slaver labor in Marzdorf, Germany, were the most intolerable.

Marzdorf was a horrible camp. We were housed in a building maybe on the sixth or seventh or eighth floor, way up, and it was terribly hot. We worked at different jobs there. There were several that were dreadful. And I remember my resistance really weakening there. And I said to myself, once, after the...the coal car was empty and I was with that, standing on that, with that shovel in my hand, and I said, "It would be so easy now to jump an oncoming train, and it will be over in a couple seconds.” Become a part of that stillness, not to have to face tomorrow. What's going to be tomorrow? It's going to be flax in the morning, and the bundles at night, and the swamp again, and the hunger and that, and I just felt I had enough. And I said to myself, "It's time to do it." And I heard very faint oncoming of a train, very far away, probably. Suddenly, I felt a pain in both sides of my neck, very sharp.

And it was right at the beginning of the war, when we had not heard from my brother, and my mother was sick, and we were told that we had to leave, with 20 pounds of our belongings, our home. And I remember standing there, and we heard of a family who committed suicide together, and I sort of half-wished that my parents had suggested that. And I remember standing at the window and thinking about that. My father came up behind me—and he always knew what I was thinking—and he said to me, "What you are thinking is wrong. It's cowardly, it's terrible." He said, "You promise me never to do that, no matter what." And I didn't answer him. And then he sort of took me, he took my head, like that, and he turned it toward me, toward him, and he looked at me, and he said, "I want your promise now." And I said, "Papa, I promise." And during those last days in Märzdorf, that promise became pretty faint. And I knew that the train was going to come, and I figured, I'm going to jump. Suddenly I felt that very sharp pain in my neck. And the promise came back, and obviously I didn't.

[Text on screen] During the final stages of the war, the Nazis tried to destroy all evidence of their crimes, especially the living witnesses. Prisoners were forcibly evacuated from the camps, largely on foot. These evacuations became known as “death marches.”

It was bitter cold—it was in January—and I was coughing terribly. I had a very bad cold. And my three dearest friends—Suse Kunz, Liesel Steppe, and Ilse Kleinzähler—and I—we huddled together, the four of us. And they were very concerned about me. They said, you know, “If you can only pull through with that terrible cold and that terrible cough." It was like pneumonia or what have you. And in the morning, very early, the doors opened, not to the type of freedom we had hoped, but it opened to an incredible picture. There was freshly fallen snow for as far as the eye could see… an enormous sort of plateau, and then we came up to a gentle hill, and it was covered with snow. It was gray, it was snowing, and we were told to assemble four abreast. So, of course, it was the four of us, and we held hands, and we took the first step. And I guess we all knew that this was going to be the first step to the end of the road, either to liberation or to doom. And in front of us stretched this incredible line. Well, people looked, you know, with gray camp blankets over them—and they looked like winged death. That's all you could see. Way, way ahead, four thousand girls. And on the side were the SS men and the SS women, and they lifted their whips, and they said, "Forward, march!" And we started to march.

It was the 29th of January. We left a lot of girls back in the snow. Many were killed. That was something one can barely…can really not describe. My father had asked me when I last saw him in June—the very last day, practically in the last moment—before he left, he said to me, "Where are your skiing boots?" And I said, "Why?" And he said, "I want you to wear them today." I said, "Papa, skiing shoes in June?" He said, "I want you to wear them." One didn't argue with one's father. So I put on those boots, and I wore them throughout my entire stay in the camps for three years. And in them I'd also hidden the pictures of my parents and my brother. I didn't know, and I don't know, how my father could have known that those boots were really instrumental in saving my life on that march. I had ski shoes. Some girls had sandals. We slept outside. The frost. I saw girls breaking off their toes like twigs. And I had my ski boots.

[Text on screen] The women were divided into two groups. Gerda Weissmann and her fellow prisoners were to endure three months of exposure, starvation and arbitrary execution.

We didn't get anything to eat for days, literally. We were bitter cold and hungry and everything. And I was planning a party after the war, and I had the dilemma for almost an entire day if I should have a blue velvet dress or a red velvet dress. I couldn't resolve it. I really liked the color blue much better as a color, but I knew that red looked better on me. So… But you could occupy your mind and hang your thoughts on trivia of that nature—it became very important, and this is how you passed the hours and forgot the hunger and the cold. And I do believe that if you were blessed with imagination, that you could work that. If, unfortunately, you were a person that faced reality, I think you didn't have much of a chance.

[Text on screen] This death march would continue into the spring of 1945.

We devised sort of what we thought an incredible plan to run away. That was when we saw refugees on the road who spoke similar German than we did. So we thought at the next stop we are going to disappear in the woods. And we stopped for that rest, and I remember giving Ilse sort of a sign with my eyebrows that we should now disappear into the woods, pretending that we needed to go to relieve ourselves. And suddenly she looked up, and she said, "I'm afraid." And normally, I must say, I overruled her, you know, in most instances, and suddenly I lost, I think, my courage as well. And I said, "Okay, maybe, maybe we'll do it on the next stop." And we came out of the forest, and then we heard horrible screams. And 14 girls had hidden, had the same ideas we did, and they were all killed in front of us. That's when I decided, no matter what, I'm never going to try to run away. We'll go to the end whatever the end will be.

On the 28th of April, Ilse wasn't well at all. She was sort of hallucinating. She was saying things, which I didn't know what she meant. But then she became totally lucid. And one of the most shocking things was that one of my other friends had somehow found two potatoes. And she gave them to me, she said, "For you and for Ilse." And I gave Ilse this potato, and she said she wasn't hungry. That was the most incredible statement, not to be hungry. And she said to me, "You eat it." And then she said...she said, "I'm angry at no one. And I hope nobody is angry at me." And then she said, "If my parents and Kitty"—Kitty was her little sister—she said, "If they survive, don't tell them how I died." And then she said to me, "You'll be alone." She said, "But you have always been lucky." And there was a little brook nearby, so I got up and I wanted to get it, and an SS man came, and he shoved me, and I begged him to let me have water for her, and he kicked her head. So it was raining and so I caught some water in my hands and gave it to her. And I held her, and we both fell asleep. I woke up but she didn't.

[Text on screen] By May of 1945, the death march had come to a halt in the town of Volary, Czechoslovakia.

And I remember sitting there and really knowing that this was definitely the end. I heard American planes overhead. There was shooting. The German army was running away. There were people on the roads with children, with animals—tremendous chaos.

[Text on screen] The SS guards abandoned the survivors of the march in a vacant bicycle factory on the outskirts of Volary.

We were very, very ill. I weighed 68 pounds. My hair was white. So I was going to be 21 the following day. That morning, I went to look for Suse because Liesel said to me, "Suse went out to get some water and she has not returned." So I went out to look for her. And I found her near the pump. I thought she had fainted, but I touched her, and she was gone. I wanted to tell her, "Suse"—and I did tell her—I said, "Suse, we are liberated! We are free!" We had made a bet more than three years earlier on the train which took us to camp—a bet for a quart of strawberries and cream, to be payable after the war. I said we will be liberated, and she said we would not.

[Text on screen] U.S. Army troops entered Volary on May 7, 1945.

My very clear view of freedom and liberation came that morning when I stood in the doorway of that abandoned factory, and I saw a car coming down the hill. And the reality of that came when I saw the white star on its hood and not the swastika. There were two men in that car; one jumped out.

**Kurt Klein:**  
I saw some skeletal figures trying to get some water from a hand pump, but over on the other side, leaning next to the…against the wall, next to the entrance of the building, I saw a girl standing, and I decided to walk up to her.

**Gerda Weissmann:**  
I remember the aura of him, of that awe, of that disbelief in daylight to really see someone who fought for our freedom, for my ideals, and he looked like a god to me.

**Kurt Klein:**  
And I asked her in German and in English whether she spoke either language, and she answered me in German.

**Gerda Weissmann:**  
I knew what I had to say, and I said to him, "We are Jewish, you know." For a very long time, at least to me it seemed very long, he didn't answer me. And then his own voice betrayed his emotion—he was wearing dark glasses, I couldn't see his eyes—he said, "So am I."

[Text on screen] Lieutenant Kurt Klein was born in Waldorf, Germany. In 1937, his parents had sent him to safety in the United States.

**Kurt Klein:**  
I asked about her companions, and she said, "Come, let me show you."

**Gerda Weissmann:**  
He said, "May I see the other ladies?"—a form of address we hadn't heard for six years. I told him that most of the girls were inside and were too ill to walk. And he said to me, "Won't you come with me?" I didn't know what he meant. So he held the door open for me and let me precede him. And that was the moment of restoration of humanity, humaneness, dignity, and freedom.

**Kurt Klein:**  
We went inside the factory. It was an indescribable scene. There were women scattered over the floor on scraps of straw, some of them quite obviously with a mark of death on their faces. Something that I have never been able to forget was an extraordinary thing that happened. The girl who was my guide made sort of a sweeping gesture over this scene of devastation, and said the following words: "Noble be man, merciful and good." And I could hardly believe that she was able to summon a poem by the German poet Goethe, which was called…is called "The Divine," at such a moment. And there was nothing that she could have said that would have underscored the grim irony of the situation better than what she did.

**Gerda Weissmann:**  
And this first young American of liberation day is now my husband. He opened not only the door for me, but the door to my life and my future.

**Narrator:**  
Gerda Weissmann and Kurt Klein were married in June of 1946. Gerda Weissmann would never find out what happened to her brother. Her father and mother are known to have been deported to Auschwitz. Kurt Klein's parents were unable to escape Nazi Germany. They, too, are reported to have died in Auschwitz.

Of the 2,000 women who began the death march, most would die along the route to Czechoslovakia. Ninety-five of these women are memorialized in this small cemetery in Volary. Among the monuments are those dedicated to Liesel Steppe, Suse Kunz and Ilse Kleinzähler—the friends of a young survivor named Gerda Weissmann.

[Text on screen] Gerda Klein lives in Phoenix, Arizona. In 2002, Kurt, 82, died after 56 years of marriage to Gerda.

One Survivor Remembers is Gerda Weissmann's account of surviving the Ho