

GERDA KLEIN

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



Gerda Klein (born Gerda Weissman), daughter of Julius and Helene, was born in Bielsko, Poland on May 8, 1924. Gerda had an older brother, Arthur. The family had a

kosher home and observed all of the Jewish holidays. Both of Gerda's grandmothers lived with her family for a time, and almost every weekend, the extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins spent time at the Weissman house. Gerda had ten cats and her brother had two dogs. Gerda attended public elementary school and Catholic high school. A rabbi would come to the Catholic school to teach the Jewish students during their religious instruction classes. Gerda's family had Jewish and non-Jewish friends.

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Gerda recalls seeing planes with swastikas flying over her hometown. Bielsko was occupied by German troops two days later. Life quickly began to change for Polish Jews like the Weissman family; identification and ration cards were issued, and Jews had to wear armbands with a blue star. Gerda's brother was taken away on October 19th. The family was thrown out of their home and forced to live in their basement. To help support the family, Gerda and her mother knitted and sold sweaters.

In April 1942, the family received notice that they had to move into the Bielsko Biala ghetto. Gerda and her parents lived in one room, and they all had to work. Gerda and her mother sewed uniforms at a factory in Wadowice, and her father worked helped to fortify a river in Sucha. Gerda's father was taken away in June 1942, and shortly thereafter, Gerda was separated from her mother. Gerda never saw her family members again. In part, Gerda credits her survival to the ski boots her father told her to wear.

Between June 1942 and May 1945, Gerda was sent to Sosnowitz-Dulag, a transit camp in Poland; Bolkenhain, a labor and concentration camp in Germany; Merzdorf, a labor and concentration camp in Germany; Landeshut, a labor and concentration camp in Germany; Grünberg in Schlesien, a labor and concentration camp in Germany; and Helmbrechts, a labor and concentration camp in Germany. In January 1945, Gerda was sent on a death march; this march continued until May 1945, when she and a group of prisoners were liberated in Volary, Czechoslovakia. Throughout her time in labor and concentration camps, Gerda worked in factories and was forced to do slave labor. Throughout the Holocaust, Gerda was with three friends: Ilse, Lisl, and Susie. Gerda was the only one to survive.

When Gerda was liberated by the Americans, she met Kurt Klein, a German-Jewish refugee who was a member of the US Army. Kurt and Gerda married in 1946, and they moved to Buffalo, New York. The couple had three children and eight grandchildren. Gerda wrote a weekly column for the Buffalo Evening News. Her memoir about her Holocaust experience and survival, *All But My Life*, was first published in 1957. This interview was conducted on December 7, 1995, in Scottsdale, Arizona.