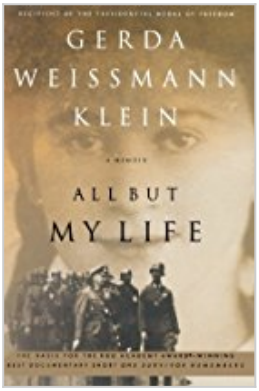

All But My Life: A Memoir

By Gerda Weissmann Klein

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All But My Life is the unforgettable story of Gerda Weissmann Klein's six-year ordeal as a victim of Nazi cruelty. From her comfortable home in Bielitz (present-day Bielsko) in Poland to her miraculous survival and her liberation by American troops--including the man who was to become her husband--in Volary, Czechoslovakia, in 1945, Gerda takes the reader on a terrifying journey.

Gerda's serene and idyllic childhood is shattered when Nazis march into Poland on September 3, 1939. Although the Weissmanns were permitted to live for a while in the basement of their home, they were eventually separated and sent to German labor camps. Over the next few years Gerda experienced the slow, inexorable stripping away of "all but her life." By the end of the war she had lost her parents, brother, home, possessions, and community; even the dear friends she made in the labor camps, with whom she had shared so many hardships, were dead.

Despite her horrifying experiences, Klein conveys great strength of spirit and faith in humanity. In the darkness of the camps, Gerda and her young friends manage to create a community of friendship and love. Although stripped of the essence of life, they were able to survive the barbarity of their captors. Gerda's beautifully written story gives an invaluable message to everyone. It introduces them to last century's terrible history of devastation and prejudice, yet offers them hope that the effects of hatred can be overcome.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Soul searching and human . . . A moving personal testament to courage.” ?*Herbert Mitgang, The New York Times*

“An unforgettable reading experience . . . *All But My Life* is one of the most beautifully written human documents I have ever read. In this respect it is as sensitive and 'disturbing' a story as is *The Diary of Anne Frank*.” ?*Library Journal*

“Gerda Weissmann Klein moves you, and not just because the story she can tell is so horrific. It is the passion with which she looked through the horror and found a heart-felt and basic goodness in humanity . . . *All But My Life* is filled with wonderful acts of decency and normalcy, even as she describes three years in labor camps and three months of a forced winter march from Germany to Czechoslovakia.” ?*Royal Ford, The Boston Globe*

About the Author

Gerda Weissmann Klein was born in Bielsko, Poland, in 1924, and now lives in Arizona with her husband, Kurt Klein, who as a U.S. Army lieutenant liberated Weissmann on May 7, 1945. The author of five books, she has received many awards and honorary degrees and has lectured throughout the country for the past forty-five years. Kurt and Gerda are the authors of *The Hours After: Letters of Love and Longing in War's Aftermath*, published by St. Martin's Press. *One Survivor Remembers* (a production of Home Box Office and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), winner of an Emmy Award and the Academy Award for documentary short subject, was based on *All But My Life.*

All But My Life
Part One
Chapter 1

THERE IS A WATCH LYING ON THE GREEN CARPET OF THE LIVING room of my childhood. The hands seem to stand motionless at 9:10, freezing time when it happened. There would be a past only, the future uncertain, time had stopped for the present. Morning-9:10. That is all I am able to grasp. The hands of the watch are cruel. Slowly they blur into its face.

I lift my eyes to the window. Everything looks unfamiliar, as in a dream. Several motorcycles roar down the street. The cyclists wear green-gray uniforms and I hear voices. First a few, and then many, shouting something that is impossible and unreal. "Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!" And the watch says 9:10. I did not know then that an invisible curtain had parted and that I walked on an unseen stage to play a part in a tragedy that was to last six years.

It was September 3, 1939, Sunday morning. We had spent a sleepless night in the damp, chilly basement of our house while the shells and bombs fell. At one point in the evening when Papa, Mama, my brother Arthur, then nineteen, were huddled in bewildered silence, my cat Schmutzi began to meow outside in the garden and Arthur stepped outside to let her in. He had come back with a bullet hole in his trousers.

"A bullet?"

"There is shooting from the roofs, the Germans are coming!"
Then, in the early gray of the morning we heard the loud rumbling of enemy tanks. Our troops were retreating from the border to Krakow, where they would make their stand. Their faces were haggard, drawn, and unshaven, and in their eyes there was panic and defeat. They had seen the enemy, had tried and failed. It had all happened so fast. Two daysbefore, on Friday morning, the first of September, the drone of a great many German planes had brought most of the people of our little town into the streets. The radio was blasting the news that the Germans had crossed our frontier at Cieszyn and that we were at war! Hastily, roadblocks had been erected. Hysteria swept over the people and large numbers left town that day.
I had never seen Bielitz, my home town, frightened. It had always been so safe and secure. Nestled at the foot of the Beskide mountain range, the high peaks had seemed to shelter the gay, sparkling little town from intruders. Bielitz was charming and not without reason was it called "Little Vienna." Having been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1919, it still retained the flavor of that era. Almost all of Bielitz' inhabitants were bilingual; Polish as well as German was spoken in the stores. In the center of the city, among carefully tended flower beds, stood its small but excellent theater, and next to it the Schloss, the castle of the Sulkowskys, the nobility closely linked to the Imperial Hapsburgs.
Nothing in my lifetime had ever disturbed the tranquility of Bielitz. Only now, when I saw people deserting it, did I realize how close, dangerously close we were to the Czechoslovakian frontier; only twenty-odd miles separated us from Cieszyn.
There had been talk of war for many weeks, of course, but since mid-August our family had been preoccupied with Papa's illness. Mama and I had been away in Krynica, a summer resort, from early June until the middle of August. Papa and Arthur had been unable to accompany us, and we returned when we received a telegram from Papa, suggesting we come home because of the gravity of the international situation. It had been somewhat of a shock to see how ill Papa looked when he met us at the station. His right arm was bothering him and Mama, alarmed, had called the doctor. The doctor diagnosed the illness as a mild heart attack and Papa was put to bed immediately.
The following day two specialists were summoned to Papa's bedside. That same day we received a cable from Mama'sbrother Leo, who was in Turkey. It read: "Poland's last hour has come. Dangerous for Jews to remain. Your visas waiting at Warsaw embassy. Urge you to come immediately."
Mama stuck the cable in her apron pocket, saying, "Papa is ill, that is our prime concern."
Papa was to be spared excitement and worry at all costs, and visitors were cautioned not to mention the possibility of war to him. Mama little realized the fate we all might have been spared had she not concealed the truth from Papa. Yet on Friday morning, September 1, when German planes roared through the sky, Papa, who had been ill for two weeks, came face to face with reality. It was a tense day. I spent most of it in my parents' bedroom and instinctively stayed close to Papa.
As that first day drew to a close, nobody touched supper, no one seemed to want to go to sleep. Mama sat in a chair near Papa's bed, Arthur and I watched from the window. Horses and wagons loaded with refugees continued to roll toward the East. Here and there a rocket, like blood spouting from the wounded earth, shot into the evening sky, bathing the valley in a grotesque red. I looked at my parents. Papa appeared strange, almost lifeless. The yellow flowers on Mama's black housecoat seemed to be burning. Outside, the mountain tops were ablaze for a moment, then they resounded with a thunderous blast that made the glass in the windows rattle like teeth in a skeleton's head. Everything was burning now. I looked at Mama again. Her soft, wavy, blue-black hair clung to her face. Her large, dark eyes seemed bottomless against her pale skin. Her mobile mouth was still and alien. The red glow was reflected in each of our faces. It made hers seem strange and unfamiliar. There was Mama, burning with the strange fire of destruction, and in the street the horses and wagons, the carts and bicycles were rolling toward the unknown. There was a man carrying a goat on his back, apparently the only possession he had. On the corner several mothers were clutching their infants to their breasts, and near them an old peasant woman crossed herself. It was as if the world had come to an end in that strange red light. Then, all of a sudden, Papa spoke to me.
"Go, call the family and find out what they are doing."

I went downstairs. I sat down next to the phone with a long list of numbers. I started at the top and worked to the bottom, but there were no answers. The telephones kept ringing and ringing. I pictured the homes that I knew so well, and with each ring a familiar object or piece of furniture seemed to tumble to the floor.
I became panicky. It seemed as though we were alone in a world of the dead. I went back upstairs. My parents and Arthur apparently had been talking. They stopped abruptly.
"Nobody answered, isn't that right?" Papa asked. I could not speak. I nodded. There was no longer any pretense. Papa motioned me to sit down on his bed. He embraced me with his left arm.
"Children," he said, "the time has come when I have to say what I hoped I would never have to say. I remember as if it were yesterday the cries of the wounded and the pale faces of the dead from the last war. I didn't think it possible that the world would come to this again. You believed I could always find a solution for everything. Yet I have failed you. I feel you children should go. Mama just told me that Mr. and Mrs. Ebersohn have asked to take you with them to look for refuge in the interior of Poland. I am sick when you most need my strength. I want you to go, children. I command you to go! His voice had assumed a tone of authority that I had never heard before. I saw Arthur look up startled at the mention of his girl friend's parents. More than ever he looked like Mama, but somehow he reminded me of Papa as he stood there tall, erect, and determined.
Almost without hesitation, he said, "No! We are going to stay together."
My parents' eyes met. I had a feeling there was relief and pride in their faces.
"I hoped you would say that," Papa said brokenly, "not for my sake, but because I hate to cast out my children to complete uncertainty. I believe that God will keep us together and under the roof of our house."
He dropped back exhausted on his pillows. The effort hadbeen too much for him, and sudden stillness fell over the room. Strangely, all sound ceased outside as well and we noted that the sky was no longer red.

When I awoke the next morning everything was as peaceful as ever. The sun shone so brightly in my room. The fall flowers in our garden were in full bloom. The trees were laden with fruit. In my room everything was as it had always been, and what's more, even Papa was out of bed. His arm was in a sling, but he was up, and it seemed so wonderful I was sure the night before had all been a nightmare. No, not quite, because in my parents' faces I could read something that hadn't been there yesterday.
When we met downstairs for breakfast everybody seemed cheerful. Papa was joking. Mama joined in this seemingly carefree banter. The maid had left to be with her relatives. Papa jokingly asked me whether I wanted the job. Nobody mentioned the war. I walked to the radio and turned it on. There was a sharp click, but no sound. I tried the phone, the lights, but all electricity was off. In a way that was good. There was no contact with the outside world. It was a wonderful, peaceful Saturday. But evening brought fury to the end of that last peaceful day. Sporadic shooting started from the rooftops, an attempt at delaying the enemy while our army retreated to Krakow. We looked for shelter in our cellar and sat there through the night. Toward morning the shooting stopped altogether and the vehicles of the Polish army ceased to roll. We came up from the cellar for a cup of tea in the living room. As I sat down on the couch near the window I could see the people outside in an obviously gay and festive mood, talking and laughing, carrying flowers, and everywhere the clicking of cameras.
"Mama, look," Arthur said. "Do you suppose-?" and he broke in the middle of the sentence, not daring to say what seemed imposs...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Richard Smith:

Book is to be different for every single grade. Book for children till adult are different content. As it is known to us that book is very important for people. The book All But My Life: A Memoir ended up being

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