

MSE1

Imagine peacefully eating breakfast with your family. Imagine suddenly learning your country has been invaded and being imprisoned in your own home. Imagine having your family slowly taken away from you one by one. Imagine being forced to slave away with only your friends to suffer alongside you for company. Imagine finally being liberated from this hell only to realize that, out of those you loved most, you alone were the only survivor.

What you just read isn't some dystopian story out of science fiction. Rather, this was a historical event. Stories like these were common for a majority of Jews living in Europe during that time. This specific story is that of Gerda Weissman Klein, one of the lucky few who survived the tragedy known as the Holocaust. Her story is just one among millions of discrimination, persecution, and often execution.

The Nazi party had come to power in 1933 and began targeting Jews such as Gerda and her family. The Nazis were radically antisemitic, meaning they were strongly prejudiced against Jews. They enacted laws to slowly exclude Jews from German society and treat them as outcasts. This eventually culminated in what the Nazi leaders called the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." This was the Nazis' plan to systematically eradicate all of Europe's Jews. They began carrying out this plan in 1941. By the end of the Holocaust in 1945, the Nazis had ended millions of lives, including over six million Jewish lives.

The Nazis had created a racial hierarchy that ranked different groups of people, putting Jews at the very bottom. They didn't start with killing. Instead, they used propaganda to influence the German people to believe in their ideas of antisemitism and a master race. They used their propaganda to dehumanize the Jews and to continue stereotypes about them., desensitizing the people to the thought of hatred and violence towards them. Eventually, culminated in the systematic discrimination and ostracization of the Jewish people.

Gerda Weissman Klein did encounter a few acts of kindness during her life in the Holocaust. Frau Kügler, a supervisor at a camp Gerda was at, knew an inspector was coming to

take away the sick to be gassed. She dragged Gerda back to the factory from the sick room, saving her life. She gave Gerda the hope that maybe not all Germans were cruel. Kurt Klein, a fellow Jew who had escaped Nazi Germany, was one of Gerda's liberators that had saved the lives of those who hadn't been killed up to that point already. He, along with the other liberators, was what gave Gerda her restoration of dignity, humanity, and freedom.

The fact that so few were there to help Gerda's family despite their suffering is abhorrent. Remember, Gerda's experiences weren't a one-off thing. The Nazi regime targeted millions of other Jews who shared similar experiences, many of which did not live to tell their story. The dreadfulness of Gerda's story and the massive scale of the Holocaust inspires me to ensure prejudice doesn't reach that scale ever again.

Prejudice, despite our best efforts, still exists around the world. While one person isn't enough to make a difference, there are many actions we can all take to combat it.

We can strive to understand those we meet as individuals instead of generalizing them based on stereotypes. We can endeavor to educate our peers to do the same and have the courage to call out our friends when they're being offensive or insensitive. We can aim not to spread the hate or negativity we see on the news. We can even aspire to have the courage to step out of the crowd to help someone in need.

The Holocaust was one of the most prolific genocides of the Western world. Millions of people in Europe at the time had similar stories to Gerda, similar stories of feeling dehumanized, ostracized, and alone. Gerda's story had a melancholy end, but we can learn that even small things can give someone the hope that they're not alone. We can take inspiration from her story, and from the stories of the millions of lives that were lost in this terrible time, and ensure prejudice doesn't ever reach a similarly massive scale. We can't necessarily rid the world of evil, but we can at least stop it from growing to the size of the Holocaust. Forgetting these stories is what can lead to history repeating itself. In the words of Holocaust survivor

Walter Kase: "Change isn't happening fast enough for men. You must make it happen faster.

When you see injustice happening, stand up!"