

Honorable Mention

Division I – Writing

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Hope and Resilience Shown By Gerda Weissman Klein

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"If the darkness seems so total, if you think there is no way out, remember, it is always darkest before the dawn" (Gerda Weissman Klein). That quote from the Holocaust survivor and author of "All but My Life" Gerda Weissman Klein encapsulated hope in a time of despair and darkness. Gerda was born in Belietz, Poland in 1929, and her brother, Mama, and Papa all died in the Holocaust. Her survival story inspires many around the world. Something that inspired hope and resilience in Gerda during the Holocaust was the physical and mental effects of her family after they were separated.

To start, a reason for Gerda's survival was the mental moments left by her family. Before Gerda was split from her parents, and after she was forced to sell all of her possessions, Papa said to her "promise me that no matter what happens you will never do it" (Klein pg 32). She made this promise, and then she wrote "in the years to come, when death seemed the only solution, I remembered that promise as my most sacred vow" (pg 32). Soon after this promise Gerda and her parents were taken to different work camps, and Gerda never saw them again. The promise was Gerda's light in the darkness. When everything was lost the sacred vow shined, it paved the way to hope and survival. Later in her life, during a notable death march when survival seemed impossible, she persevered, for she wanted to make her father proud. She remained strong and hopeful; she defied expectations and did not let the Nazi's achieve their end goal. In addition, the thought of Gerda's mother sitting on a dirty freight car praying for Gerda and Papa with all her might inspired her, she stated "Now I have to live", "because I am alone and nothing can hurt me any more" (pg 95). When all odds were against her the memories of her parents were like a ray of hope shining through all the pain that she experienced.

Next, Gerda's survival was influenced by the physical items given to her before her parents' departure. When the Weissman family were saying their last goodbyes, Papa told Gerda to "wear [your skiing shoes] tomorrow when you go to Wadowitz", and she expressed that "those shoes played a vital part in saving my life. They were sturdy and strong, and when three years later they were taken off my frozen foot they were good still" (pg 86). Many of the other girls during the death march screamed and cried, for they had no shoes and left a bloody trail when they walked. Their beaten, rotten feet made it almost impossible for them to walk. Gerda on the other hand had ski boots made for the heavy ice and snow. The ski boots kept her feet safe and warm, so she could focus on survival. Furthermore, Gerda also kept photos of Papa, Mama, and her brother Arthur in the ski boots. These photos were her most prized possessions during the long death march, and they empowered her to be hopeful and survive.

To conclude, hope and resilience is displayed many times in Gerda's motivating life story. Two ways that helped Gerda stay hopeful and resilient were the mental, physical, and personal effects of her family. Even though Gerda was away from her parents their influence on her stayed with her throughout her life. Gerda's positive attitude and survival is an astounding feat, and people like her are what made the Holocaust and the Nazi plan for complete annihilation of the Jewish religion a failure. Her hope, resilience, and resistance live on and still inspire people to do good today.

Works Cited

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