

Author, Historian, Inspiration: Gerda Weissmann Klein

Gerda Weissmann Klein has dedicated her life to easing human suffering. She shares her story of the Holocaust and the horrors of being forced into slave labor at the age of 15, sent to a succession of WWII concentration camps, culminating in the 350 mile Death march where a childhood friend died in her arms. The agony of exposure, starvation, and arbitrary execution reduced the numbers from 2,000 women to 120. Despite the atrocities she suffered, Gerda found the strength to live.

“I’m not unique,” she said. “I was blessed with freedom. Survival is a privilege and a deep obligation.” To that end her life’s work has been helping people understand what has gone before and how to save others. For more than sixty years Mrs. Klein has shared a message of hope, love and humanity through books, film documentaries, speeches all over the world, and the foundation she and her husband created.

The Klein Foundation has partnered with Time Classroom to create *Stand Up, Speak Out, Lend a Hand*, which is a multimedia educational program that has been distributed to more than 20,000 high school teachers across the United States. The curriculum shares the Klein’s experiences as a base to teach the importance of respect, responsibility and acceptance of differences.

They established a partnership with the Southern Poverty Law Center to address anti-Semitism and intolerance in its larger context. So far this program has been used in more than 98,000 schools, teaching nearly 10 million students and is available free of charge. “No child should suffer hunger, loss or death due to prejudice,” she said.

After the 1999 Columbine shooting massacre in Colorado, Gerda and Kurt Klein were asked to come and speak with the students at the memorial dedication. “We embraced the surviving kids. It was an important event in our country. There was so much hatred going on that children were being killed. It doesn’t need to be. With the communications and bounty we have now the young people need to have hope that this can change in the future.” Gerda discovered that many of the same surviving students went to New York after 9/11 to help out.

Through her writing Gerda has found comfort. She has published eight books for adults and children. Her autobiography, *All But My Life*, has been in print for 52 years and published in 62 editions. It was the foundation for the Oscar and Emmy winning documentary *One Survivor Remembers*. Her book, *The Hours After*, follows up with her liberation and love affair with her then future husband, Kurt Klein, a United States Army intelligence officer. The reader is given an intimate glimpse of Kurt and Gerda through the letters they wrote while she struggled to escape the post-war bureaucracy in Europe.

On May 7, 1945, Gerda and the other survivors were released from a locked bicycle warehouse, the doors rigged to explode. She weighed only 68 pounds, had white hair, and

was one day from her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Wearing rags and a pair of boots that her father had wisely advised her to wear before he and her mother were taken Gerda said, "I couldn't have survived the march without those boots."

Her first words to Kurt when he opened the door to their prison was, "We are Jewish, you know." He hesitated then told her, "So am I." She felt it was one of the greatest moments of her life. His politeness restored her to humanity just by calling them ladies and allowing her to precede him through the door.

Kurt and Gerda were married in Paris in 1946 and lived in Buffalo, NY for the majority of their 56 years together. "Coming to America was like coming to heaven," she said. "I didn't know the word trauma. I was so happy to be here and to be free and with my beloved husband." She didn't feel isolated even though she didn't speak any English. "I steeped myself in the English language. Creatively I work in English." When she tells her story she tells it in English because it's easier, "it didn't happen in English, it happened in German."

The Klein's had three children, two daughters and a son. They have nine grand children and a new great grandchild. Kurt passed away in 2002 and Gerda misses him every moment of every day. "I'm so proud that my husband married me. We had a wonderful life together and it is very tough without him," Gerda said. "My husband always said that pain should not be wasted, it can be used to heal, even yourself."

The story of Kurt and Gerda's meeting and life together has been featured in television programs such as *Oprah*, *60 Minutes* and *CBS Sunday Morning*. Their story was also portrayed in the film *Testimony*, which is permanently on exhibit at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

"I have no education to speak of," she said. "Teachers are my heroes." Yet, this woman has taught millions with her message of hope and freedom. Because of her amazing contributions to her adopted country of America she has been honored by the United Nations, received the Lion of Judah award, seven Doctorates of Humane Letters and countless other awards. She has worked tirelessly to fight hunger, violence and prejudice and encourages young people to get involved in community service and social action.

Last year Gerda founded a non-profit organization called Citizenship Counts that provides a civics education curriculum to middle school students. The children ultimately plan and host a naturalization ceremony in their school. Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor will officiate at the March 23, 2009 nationalization ceremony for the pilot program of 100 Phoenix and Scottsdale students.

On Wednesday, March 25<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 PM, Mrs. Klein will speak at the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration at Newman University here in Wichita. She will bring her message of hope and encourage all those in attendance to foster tolerance, understanding and service, one to another.

-BD Tharp