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All But My Life: A Memoir

by Gerda Weissmann Klein
Non-Fiction, 1957



1 It was snowing heavily. After a time we heard the courtyard gates burst open. Every heart Beat faster in expectation. There were shrieks and screams and cries outside. We could hear running feet and shouting from the other side of the barricaded doors. Those of us who sat next to the doors started calling to the newcomers in our sleeping quarters.

2 They were Jewish girls. They had come from another camp and had been walking for five days. Now we were to join them. They thought we were going to Oranienburg, a concentration camp like Auschwitz, to be gassed. Auschwitz, they said, had been captured by the Russians, who had reconquered Poland and were crossing the German frontier. The English and Americans were invading Germany from the West. Would a miracle happen before we reached the gas chambers?

3 And so the last stretch of the war began. Not in peaceful Bolkenhain, not in the coal cars of Marzdorf, the night shifts of Landeshut. Nor were we to endure it in tuberculosis-ridden Grünberg. I was certain that we would meet freedom somewhere in the open, and that we would meet it soon.

4 "You are crazy!" Suse said. "We will never see the **liberation**, for they will see to it. They would leave us here if they did not want us killed."

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5 "We will be free," I insisted. "I know it, I feel it."

6 Ilse and Liesel sat in silence. Suse's big eyes filled with tears, the first tears that I ever saw her shed.

7 "How can you believe so strongly?" she murmured. "But then, you always believed. Remember when we met on the train?"

8 I nodded.

9 "Well, you lost that bet," she reminded me.

10 "I know," I said.

11 "But do you still believe?"

12 "I do!"

13 "Tell me, Gerda," Suse whispered urgently, "what is it? What makes you so sure?"

14 "I don't know. It's something I cannot explain, but I know somehow that we will be liberated."

15 "And I feel," Suse stammered, "I feel that I will not be."

16 All that last night in Grünberg I coughed. I think I had a temperature. Ilse, Suse, Liesel, and I cuddled together closely.

17 "Gerda, don't get sick," they begged, as if I could decide.

18 At dawn we were given three portions of bread, which we carefully placed in our bundles. We saw the kitchen personnel pack big **parcels** of food in their bundles.

19 At the last moment before we assembled, the four of us decided to put on most of the clothes we had intended to carry.

20 The SS women came for us. We lined up. Ilse was on my left, Liesel and Suse were on my right. We stood erect.

21 "Let us be strong," Liesel whispered.

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22“Yes,” I answered.

23“*You be strong,*” Suse whispered back to me. I was now the least fit of the group.

24As we squeezed through the door, we gripped hands for a **fleeting** moment. Then we marched into the bright snow.

25The outer gates were open when we reached the courtyard. Stretching as far as we could see

Were columns of girls. I was shocked to see so many. We learned later there were about three

thousand from other camps; with our **contingent** from Grünberg we totaled nearly four thousand. We were divided into two transports amidst much whipping and screaming by the SS. Many girls tried to shift from one group to another, in the hope that it might be the better one.

26We four were in the column which was doomed; out of two thousand only a hundred and Twenty survived. The other column was liberated much sooner. Had I been part of it my fate

would have been different. Less suffering, yes, but less happiness, too, I am sure.

27Although I had seen misery, I was utterly unprepared for the picture that the girls who had already been marching for a week presented. Covered with gray blankets, they reminded me of drawings of Death when, winged and garbed in loose sheets, he comes to collect the living. Some of them were barefoot, others wore crude wooden clogs. Many of them left a bloody trail in the fresh snow.

28Suse looked at me and I looked at my feet—clad in the ski boots that Papa had insisted I wear on that hot summer day. Papa, Papa, how could he possibly have known. The boots were still in good shape, and I had precious things hidden in them: snapshots of Papa, Mama, Arthur, and Abek, wrapped in a piece of cloth, and the packet of poison. In Grünberg they had taken away all pictures, papers, and letters. Germany, we were told, needed all scrap paper she could get. Ilse and I had managed to hide our pictures. Our only worry now was that water might soak through our shoes and ruin them.

29“Forward march!” shouted the SS *Wachtmeister* at the head of our column.

30“Forward march!” echoed SS men. Carrying rifles, they were stationed along our column at

intervals of about thirty feet.

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31“Forward march!” came the high-pitched voices of the whip-armed SS women.

32We took the first step. I thought: I am marching to death or to liberation. It was the morning of January 29, 1945.

33We marched all day, with a break at noon. Ilse and I shared one of our portions of bread, guarding the rest carefully.

34At the head of the column we saw the commandant of the SS with a Hungarian-Jewish girl who, we were told, was his mistress. She and a few of her close friends knew no want;

they had plenty to eat, and slept always in peasant houses, rather than in barns or in open fields as the others did.

35“How could they?” I asked myself over and over again.

36Toward evening, as it grew colder, we were herded off the road and into a huge barn. We huddled together in the darkness and again Ilse and I shared a portion of our bread. It wasn't enough.

37“Ilse, I am terribly hungry,” I confessed.

38“So am I,” Ilse admitted. “I would like for something warm to drink. We can't eat any more bread, for who knows when they will give us more?”

39“Careful, careful!” somebody called in the darkness. “The Magyars are after our bread!”

40Yes, the poor Hungarian girls were hungry. They had been marching a week already.

41“My shoes, my shoes!” another voice cried. “They took them from right next to me!”

42Many of the Hungarian girls had no shoes. To save their lives they stole shoes off the feet of

those who slept. How much I learned that night!

43When the doors of the dark barn were thrown open in the morning I could see a flood of wintry

sunlight on the glittering snow. Two SS men stood at the entrance and with their rifles prodded us as we emerged four abreast.

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44A little distance away stood the SS commandant with his girlfriend and her court of privileged friends. They were eating bread and drinking something steaming out of a large thermos. How good it must feel, I thought, the warm drink in that cold!

45We assembled and were counted and recounted. A girl from Grünberg was missing. A few others were beaten bloody because of it, but either they did not know what had become of her or they would not tell.

46We learned the story later. A German from the factory who was in love with the girl had followed our column, and under cover of darkness had snatched her quietly away.

47We marched many miles that second day, often plowing through untouched snow. Again we rested at midday.

48"I wonder when they will give us something to eat," Ilse said to the three of us as we nibbled our dry, frozen bread.

49We did not answer.

50Girls who had lagged behind that morning had been beaten by the SS men with the butts of their guns.

51After the midday pause, a couple of girls just sat motionless on the snow, refusing to go. We marched on. Behind us there were pistol shots.

52"God!" I said, "God!" looking up to the sky. The sky was blue, the snow was clean, the snowy pine trees were beautiful in the sunlight.

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Use "All But My Life" to answer questions 13 - 19. Then fill in the answers on your answer document.

Genre: Non-Fiction Selection: "All But My Life"

8.8A [sensory language]

13 Why does the author compare the girls who had been marching for a week to the "drawing of Death" in paragraph 27?

- A** To reveal that prisoners were taken on long walks while they were barefoot
- B** To emphasize how the severe conditions were slowly killing the prisoners
- C** To demonstrate the narrator's feelings about living in these harsh conditions
- D** To show that they wore gray blankets and raggedy and loose-fitting clothes

8.8FIG19D [Infer elements of sensory language]

14 The author uses imagery in paragraph 1 most likely to show how—

- F** the narrator and others in the concentration camp experienced fear and chaos.
- G** the new people who came into the concentration camp were cold from the snow.
- H** difficult it was for the prisoners to run through the barricaded doors.
- J** the prisoners screamed and cried when they entered the concentration camp.

8.2A [root words/ affixes]

15 The Latin word *indurare*, meaning "to harden," helps the reader understand that the word endure in paragraph 3 means-

- A** to be free
- B** to give up
- C** to dream
- D** to withstand

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8.2B [context clues]

16 Which words in paragraph 33 help the reader understand what the word portions mean?

- F** *we marched all day*
- G** *with a break at noon*
- H** *Ilse and I shared*
- J** *guarding the rest*

8.7 Fig. 19D [inferencing elements of fiction]

17 The author includes a detailed description of her surroundings in paragraph 52 most likely to—

- A** illustrate the beauty of her surroundings
- B** express her excitement about the change in weather
- C** distract herself from her harsh reality
- D** show how she encouraged the others to keep going

8.3 Fig 19D [Inference Theme]

18 What is the main theme of the selection?

- F** People should fight for their freedom.
- G** People should hold on to hope in times of desperation.
- H** Sometimes you must risk losing your dignity in order to survive.
- J** Breaking the rules usually leads to a negative outcome.

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8.7 Fig 19E [Inferencing Summary]

19 What is the best summary of the selection?

- A** Gerda lived in hope throughout her journey that they would be saved before their death. She describes how the prisoners from Hungary would steal shoes off other prisoners who were asleep. She notices some girls begin to refuse to march in the snow and is left to assume they are punished by death as she hears gun shots.
- B** The narrator is worried about the new prisoners coming into her camp as she hears them yell and cry out. She becomes confused about where the SS officers plan to take her and the big group of prisoners. However, Gerda stays hopeful that she will survive the fearful journey ahead.
- C** The narrator is often troubled with what is happening around her throughout her journey. On one occasion she describes how some of the girls were beaten by the SS officers because a prisoner was missing. She became overwhelmed with her reality she focused on her surroundings.
- D** Gerda and her group were joined by another group of prisoners from a different camp. Even though her friends believed they would not survive, she lived in hope that they would be saved. As Gerda begins the journey ahead, she is surprised to see how many and how deathly most of the prisoners who joined her appeared. As the big group travels, they encounter difficult and grueling experiences.