

SECOND PLACE MIDDLE SCHOOL PROSE

Small Things with Great Love

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Love. When thinking of love, most think about a dizzying romance and intimacy, but it is so much deeper and profound. Pure love is altruism. It is giving without the expectation of getting. "For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned." These words from St. Francis are the foundation of Gerda's survival. Minuscule acts of love empowered Gerda Weissmann Klein to endure the unthinkable. Little acts of love helped her during a time in which the Nazi regime executed more than ten million innocent people in the Jewish community.

Born May 8, 1924, Gerda Weissmann was part of a loving and happy family in Bielsko, Poland. Living in a liberal Jewish home, Gerda learned from a young age to respect others' religions. Her mother Helena was a beautiful and loving woman. Julius, her father, was respected in the community. Reminiscing about those times, Gerda described a peaceful childhood.

September 3, 1939, this idyllic facade crumbled with the German invasion of Poland. Gerda was 15 years old. With no declaration of war, the Nazis invaded. Fear grew and old friends abandoned Gerda. Swastikas sprouted as a symbol of hatred and destruction, while beautiful home gardens were forbidden.

June 27, 1942, Gerda was equipped with her only weapon against the Nazis. She had been taught love. In the face of death, her parents spoke quietly about their children, their hopes, and their love. Gerda later states that she thought they gave her "the most priceless gift" that night (55:13). It taught her to focus on love and family in the most harrowing of times. The following day she saw her father for the last time.

Soon she was separated from her mother. Gerda arrived at Bolkenhain in August. There, she was to work in a textile factory. The conditions were inhumane. Gerda was given orders by Frau Kugler. On the outside, Kugler, "barked like a dog" and had the demeanor of an army general. Paradoxically, she turned out to be a decent and caring person. Gerda credits her with saving her life. Kugler showed love without expecting anything in return. Kugler's act of caring and love served as a break from the constant reminder of the horrors from the war, a reminder of human decency.

Mother Teresa once said "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Gerda's parents taught her this and Frau Kugler reminded her of this. They gave Gerda the strength to overcome adversity. She was given the best weapon against the Nazis and their collaborators. She has taught me to appreciate these little acts of love and to show love to others. Do not expect anything in return because love is altruism. I too can do great things in small ways. I have the ability to use the greatest weapon against hate – love.