

The Power of Promise
Dorothy Laster, Grade 8
St. Junipero Serra Catholic School, Rancho Santa Margarita, CA
Teacher: Lynne Pantano
Survivor: Gerda Weissmann Klein

The Power of Promise

Promise is vulnerable.

It is a capacity for greatness, but it is not a guarantee.

Gerda Weissmann Klein was born into a world bursting with the promise of love, acceptance, and limitless possibility. She lived in Bielsko, Poland, with her parents, her brother, and a large extended family who congregated at her home each Sunday. “I was taught to love my own religion and tradition,” she explains in her video testimony, “and to respect everybody else’s religion as well.” Gerda dreamed of becoming a mother and a writer, and in this atmosphere of love and respect, everything seemed possible.

But on September 3, 1939, the promise of her childhood was shattered when the Nazis invaded Bielsko. Gerda was 15 years old. As “flags with swastikas sprouted from rooftops,” she remembers, her relatives fled; her brother was conscripted for forced labor with the German army; and old friends rejected her. Forced to sell their belongings to survive, Gerda and her parents lived in their basement until 1942, when they entered the Biala ghetto. “The life we knew, the life we were a part of—it was all gone,” she says.

But promise can also be powerful.

It is choosing, committing, and doing.

That’s why, after learning of a family who had committed suicide, Gerda’s father made her promise never to surrender to desperation that way. Gerda could not have imagined, when she responded, “I promise you,” that her words would prove to be a lifeline. For one night in the Marzdorf work camp, exhausted, suffering, and lonely, Gerda contemplated jumping in front of a train. Only the memory of her promise and its connection to her father stopped her.

From 1942 to 1945, Gerda labored in Bolkenhain, Marzdorf, Landeshut, and Grunberg. Amid the harsh conditions in the camps, there were glimpses of promise: a raspberry from her friend, Ilse; a play performed with the other girls; an SS guard, Frau Kugler, who proved to be one of the most decent people Gerda ever met. Those glimpses reminded Gerda of her humanity; they affirmed her connection to other people. And that sense of connection gave Gerda the strength to make another important promise. During the death march to Czechoslovakia in 1945, as Ilse lay dying in her arms, Gerda promised her friend that she would keep going for another week. One week later, Gerda was liberated.

It is vital that we uphold the power of promise through connection.

This is the message of Gerda’s testimony.

Today, threatened by an unpredictable virus, we must cooperate to keep each other safe. By doing so, we acknowledge each person's innate promise. We must support those struggling with fear or loss. By doing so, we protect each person's innate promise. We must affirm our connection. By doing so, we nurture each person's innate promise.

I will rise to the challenge.

It is our responsibility to take care of one another.
I will let human connection strengthen and guide me.

I promise.