

# One Survivor Remembers

By Kary Antholis

*Oscar's Docs, 1964–85: The Front Lines at Home and Abroad* program notes, 2011

*Reprinted by permission of the author and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*

In the summer of 1994, I was an executive in HBO's documentary department. My boss was Sheila Nevins. Sheila had developed a reputation for overseeing some of the most proactive, incisive and innovative documentary films in America. The three years that I worked for her were my film school, and we worked on many films together. The subject matter ranged from AIDS to crime to education. For each film we would discuss the relationship between the subject matter and the appropriate filmmaking techniques. The filmmakers who worked for Sheila - among the most accomplished in the field - were devoted to working with her. Each believed that collaborating with Sheila allowed them to do their best work.

Sheila and I discussed finding a documentary for HBO to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps at the end of World War II. Our notion was to find a filmmaker who could communicate to younger generations the lives and loves lost in the Holocaust in a way that the statistics and black and white footage could not.

My mother was a victim of a Nazi-backed atrocity. When she was 10, her father was executed by Greek collaborators, as random retribution for Greek resistance activity, and she was the last family member to see him alive. Over the years, my mother spoke little of those events, burying her grief in her dreams for a life in America, and later for her two sons.

As the summer of '94 progressed, genocide again raged in the Balkans; this time in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Seeing the faces of Muslim girls separated forever from their fathers in Srebrenica, I saw my mother's experience half a century earlier with new clarity. As Sheila discussed her aims for this "liberation" film, I felt I knew exactly what she wanted.

We interviewed several filmmakers planning liberation films. We watched a number of classic Holocaust documentaries, including "Night and Fog" and "The Sorrow and the Pity," then visited to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The permanent exhibit at the museum is staggering, and there were two



*Gerda Weissmann at the time the film was made and as a teenage girl in Poland when the Nazis invaded in 1939.*

experiences which were transformative. The first was standing in a room in which the walls were covered by family photographs from the pre-war years, where you could feel the individuality of the loves lost and lives torn asunder by genocidal hatred.

The second was watching Sandy Bradley's testimony film that completes the museum exhibit. While all of the survivors told deeply moving stories, there was one segment that related the experience of lost love, family and friendship with particular acuity and accessibility. The interviews with Gerda Weissmann and Kurt Klein were brief, but were so powerful that it became immediately clear to both Sheila and me that we had our film subject.

We immediately contacted Michael Berenbaum and Raye Farr at the Museum's Research Institute, who facilitated our meeting Kurt and Gerda Klein.

As the plans evolved to meet with the Kleins, Sheila wondered which filmmaker could build upon the brief interviews and make a film which served the vision that we shared. And that is when I pitched myself. To my surprise, Sheila did not laugh me out of the room. In fact, she thought about it for a couple of days, and then said "You can do it. But it won't be possible for you to be both an executive and the filmmaker. So choose." And so I chose.

I went to visit the Kleins in Arizona, and we spent two days going through letters, photos and passages from Gerda's book "All But My Life." They were like long-lost grand-parents to me, as they patiently related a more complete sense of Gerda's experience. Late into each evening, Gerda invited me deeper into the memories she held of her lost loved ones.

When I returned to New York, we set about planning to interview them on film. The power of Gerda's memories continued to resonate in my imagination.

In that context, I thought about the concept for the film -- how could we make the viewer's experience unique and serve our original vision? Martin Ostrow had already made a beautiful film of Kurt's experience, so I chose to focus on Gerda. I thought that most effective way to reach the viewer would be to stay out of Gerda's way and allow her to establish a sense of intimacy with as little artifice as possible. So I came to the notion that the film should feel like a late-evening conversation between the viewer and Gerda.

I watched all of the interviews that Sandy Bradley shot for her film. Some of the material was so magical, that even though Sandy's interview was shot three years earlier, I concluded that we should set out to match Kurt and Gerda's hair and wardrobe so we could give the appearance of one seamless conversation. I also concluded that Sandy and her crew should do the interviews again. There is an intangible uniqueness to the relationship between interviewer and subject and, again, I think the continuity of her questioning contributes to the sense of seamlessness.

Once we had the interviews, I had a pretty clear picture of what the film should be. We would put the interviews in sequence, and then find images and sounds that seemed to be emerging from the interviews, almost as manifestations of Gerda's memory. I was influenced in this notion by the work of Alan Berliner, whose films about his parents are masterpieces of memory-filmmaking. So I made a cassette tape that I could play as I traveled through the places of Gerda's memory. I then searched for the real locations in Poland and the Czech Republic so I could walk in Gerda's boots.

We were incredibly lucky. Her childhood home was still standing. It had become a tenement, but from the right angles you could see its 19th century charm. In fact, communism seemed to have frozen everything in time. I would walk through these places with Gerda's voice guiding me. I would then communicate the shots I wanted with our Polish cinematographer, Andrzej Jeziorek. We also recorded wild sound from the locations, again to use as evocations of memory. I came back with footage and sound which were guided by the rhythms of Gerda's interview. Our associate producer, Anne Sundberg, worked with Michael Berenbaum and Raye Farr at the Museum to collect photos and stock footage to supplement and evoke Gerda's memories, and to

make sure that we were scrupulous in accurately using these elements.

Meanwhile along with our master editor, Larry Silk and our sound designer, Richard Fiocca, we set about to weave all of the elements together into one seamless memory from Gerda.

It has been nearly thirteen years since "One Survivor Remembers" was created, and won both an Oscar and an Emmy. The film continues to realize our original aims, by relating Gerda's message of tolerance and humanity to literally millions of people each year.

In 2005, the Southern Poverty Law Center (in association with the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation) made the film available free to educators throughout America. This DVD was sent with a teaching guide aimed at assisting junior high and high school teachers in offering their students context for the film's message of tolerance. "One Survivor Remembers" has quickly become one of the most widely-distributed such teaching kits in SLPC history. Over 114,000 DVDs and videos have been distributed, and it is estimated that from 10-20 million students have seen the film. An additional 5-10 million students will see it this year. Also, this year, the United Nations has begun distributing the film around the world through its various human rights film festivals.

When we made the film, the genocidal wars in Bosnia and Rwanda raged. Our hope was that this film would communicate to future generations the tragic consequences of intolerance, in a way that statistics and the dehumanizing footage of genocide cannot. Gerda's memories as captured in "One Survivor Remembers" can tell posterity that these tragedies are experienced by real human beings - with parents and children, siblings and friends - whose lives are not so dissimilar from our own.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Kary Antholis serves as Senior Vice President of Miniseries for HBO Films of Home Box Office, Inc. Antholis joined HBO in 1992 as a Director of documentary programming. His other credits include "The Corner" and "From the Earth to the Moon".*