

Children in World War II

Abstract

This lesson gives students an opportunity to see the war through the eyes of children who kept diaries or have written memoirs. Through identification with the authors, students get a sense of the times, and can show empathy. Working in a group, the students will learn to read a historical source, and (through discussion) will get a feel for what life was like for a wartime child, and gain a better understanding of the everyday hardships of wartime.

Overall goal

To learn how the daily lives of children in different countries changed during WWII.

Detailed goals

- 1 To get a sense of the tragedy, and to appreciate the vicissitudes, of the life of an ordinary person during the war. To realise that war affects everyone: rich and poor, adults and children, no matter where they live.
- 2 To acquaint the students with the concepts 'way of life' and 'everyday life in wartime'.
- 3 To compare wartime everyday life in different countries: the USSR (Belarussian SSR, Russian SSR), Poland, Germany.
- 4 To teach the children to search for information in a historical source (using analytical skills, identifying key information, performing critical analysis), and to read a historical source.

Methods used

The Source Method, discussion, case study, analysis and comparison.

Equipment

Handouts (texts from 9 diaries, or memoirs, and questions on them), an OHP (desirable), devices with internet access (students' mobile phones), map, labels to stick on the screen

Authors

Anna Nekrasova Born in 1927 in the village of Petrovskoye, Khomutovsky District, Kursk Region, Soviet Russia.

Lev Posherstnik Born in 1924 in Tula, Soviet Russia.

Valentina Shishlo (née Danilova) Born into a military family on February 10, 1936 in the village of Belitsa Zhlobin region, Belarussian SSR.

Zinaida Goryachko Born on June 11, 1931, and lived in the small village of Vysochany, Liozno district, Vitebsk region, Belarussian SSR.

Krystyna Markówna From Przemyśl, Poland.

Jadwiga O. Born in 1925, Drohobych district, Lviv Voivodeship, Poland.

Gerda Altpeter (née Rappaport) Born in 1926, from Essen, a city in the Ruhr region and the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

Ursula Brecht (née Lindemann) Born 1928, from Cologne, Germany.

Gertrud Zillikens (née Riediger) Born May 19, 1933, in Braunsberg (now Braniewo) in East Prussia, Germany.

Note: If you wish, you may replace the material with local material, or you may add another diary or memoir from your own country.

Agenda and timings

| Introduction | Group work | Answering the teacher's questions | Discussion and conclusions |
|--------------|------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 8 minutes | 15 minutes | 10 minutes | 12 minutes |

Detailed
lesson plan

Introduction

5 minutes

Introduction by the teacher.

The teacher refreshes the students' knowledge of WWII. She prompts them to remember when WWII began for different countries, and to recall what were the opening hostilities. Using the map, the students examine the movement of the front line, and remind themselves how long the war went on, and when it ended.

The teacher asks: How do you understand the term 'everyday life'? The teacher listens to the answers and then explains the term using examples of the students' own lives.

3 minutes

The teacher explains the task. Depending on the class size, the teacher divides the class into a maximum of 8 groups. Each group is given the diary/memoir of a child who lived during WWII.

Part 1 Group work

15 minutes

Group work with the diaries/memoirs. The students have to find answers to questions about the child who wrote the diary/memoir. The teacher can show the questions via the OHP. Where they see answers to the questions, the students should make notes on the printouts of the diary/memoir, by underlining key words or writing them in the margin.

Assignment: Look at the material. Find the child's place of residence on the interactive map on the screen. Attach a label. Find a description of the locality on the internet. What was the situation on the front line?

Part 2 Answering the teacher's questions

10 minutes

Questions (the students should answer in the first person).

- 1 Please introduce yourself (what is your name, how old were you when the war started?)
- 2 Which of you lived in a city? Which of you lived in a village? What country did you live in?
- 3 Who did you live with? What did your parents do? In what conditions did you grow up?
- 4 How did you learn about the beginning of the war?
- 5 What has changed in your life since the beginning of the war?
- 6 What did you do during the war? How did you help your family or your friends?
- 7 What difficulties did you experience with supplies of food?
- 8 What did you manage to retain from peacetime in your daily life?
- 9 Look at the photos of the war years. Choose the one which might be a picture of you (your diary/memoir author). Explain the basis of your choice.

Part 3 Discussion and conclusions

10 minutes Discussion (moderated by the teacher).

Questions for discussion:

Option 1

- What differences were there between the children's everyday lives before and during the war?
- What differences were there between the daily lives in different countries?
- When did the child have to make a difficult choice? Why couldn't he/she have acted differently?
- Why do children write about terrifying events in such a calm way?
- What impressed you most in the diaries/memoirs and why?

Option 2

- What differences and similarities are there in the situations in which the children found themselves?
- Which child was in the most difficult situation?
- What impressed you most in the diaries/memoirs and why?

2 minutes Conclusions. The teacher makes a brief summary of the discussion.





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Anna Ivanovna Nekrasova

Born in 1927 in the village of Petrovskoye,
Khomutovsky district, Kursk region, Soviet Russia.

1941

- June 22** 'The war has come,' my parents whisper. War ... What is it? War is scary, people are afraid of it. And I'm scared too. I glance furtively at my fellow villagers: everyone has confusion and fear in their eyes.
- July 10** Father went to the front today. How difficult it was to say goodbye! Mama, exhausted from tears, clung to our father's shoulder. She'd already stopped crying; she looked at Dad with a stony expression. Father tried to hug all of us to him: me, and Sasha, and Nadia. Anxiety beats in my heart: will we see you again?
- September 5** Today we received our first letter from Dad!!! We are all happy! Mama read it out loud, holding the precious page in one hand and wiping away her tears with the other. The tears were rolling down her face like a stream. Then Mama folded the letter into a triangle and put it on the table, and Sasha and I read it again. Nadia still can't read, though. She picked it up, turned it over, stroked it with her thin hand, and put it back. Dad writes: 'If only I could just have the tiniest glimpse of you all, even for a second.'
- September 14** We live in constant fear. The Germans have already reached us. Yesterday my friends and I were passing the school, and I was startled at the depressing environment: empty classrooms, peeling walls, gray ceilings. When will it all end?
- November 21** Today is a festival day, but there are no guests or treats. It's not the right time for celebrating. Many of my friends no longer have fathers, just 'killed in action' notices...

1942

- January 6** Winter has come into its own. It's cold ... Every time I gulp down a hot lunch, I dream of having more, knowing that it's an impossible dream ...
- January 27** ... I made a decision that was very difficult for me: I've cut off my long braid. I couldn't take care of it in these conditions ...
- February 11** Today Sashka and his friends secretly handed over weapons to the partisans. They collected them in the forests near the village. We didn't tell Mama, she'll worry. After all, the Germans will not have mercy on anyone helping the partisans.
- March 5** It's already evening, and my heart is still in my mouth, I've been so afraid. In the afternoon, when neither Mama nor Sasha was at home, two Fritz came to our house. They tramped all round the room, looked behind the curtains and into the cellar, and said: "Partisan! Partisan!" I immediately understood what they were looking for, but was too frightened to say anything. My little sister buried her face in my knees and covered her ears with her palms. The Germans, finding nothing suspicious, left, taking food from the table with them.

Source: Diary of the war years kept by Anna Ivanovna Nekrasova (a resident of the village of Petrovskoye), edited by E. Kashlyakova and M. V. Maksimova // School research work, Olkhovskaya secondary school, Khomutovsky district, 2015.



1943**July 20**

I haven't written in my diary for a long time. So much has happened. The Germans have been driven out of our village. We suffered so much from them! .. Our Sashka's gone away to the front. His dream has come true. He added a year to his age—at the recruiting office he told them he was eighteen. Mama's worried. ... There's a lot of work to be done in the field, and in the garden. And the workers are women, children, old people. The horses have been replaced by cows. We and the other children are treated like adults, and are entrusted with responsible work. We do our best.

1944**August 27**

This morning Mama took a piece of coarse yellow calico from the chest and sewed me a dress for my birthday. I'm 17! I'm happy, it's a good present. Wearing my new dress, I forgot about the war for a few seconds, and my head was spinning with dreams of the future, of happiness and love.

1945**May 9**

Joyful news—the long-awaited victory! Everyone is jubilant! How we've dreamed about this day! Mama keeps looking up the road: she's looking to see if father is coming. I'm so happy—Daddy is alive, Sasha is alive! A new life is starting ...

Lev Posherstnik

Born in 1924. Resident of Tula. Lev kept a diary before leaving for the front, while he was a student and a member of the Komsomol.

- June 22** Today on the radio I heard Molotov's speech about German troops crossing the USSR's borders. Martial law has been declared in Tula and many other cities. My day off went badly. Went for a walk, played billiards and bingo. Read Gorky's story Confession.
- June 23** Today at the institute after work there was a meeting about the war. In the evening I went for a walk.
- June 24** Did a draft design at the institute. After work I went for a walk and played billiards. At eleven o'clock in the evening I was summoned to the District Committee of the Komsomol. The secretary told me that a detachment was being organized to combat enemy assault forces. I volunteered to join it. It's completely dark in Tula at night.
- June 27** After work, I went for a walk and played 'gorodki' and billiards. In the evening I was summoned to the District Committee of the Komsomol, where I was on duty until 2 a.m. with other signalmen.
- June 28** At the institute I made detailed drawings of a suspended trolley for ferrying timber to a mine. Today I received my first pay - 188 rubles. Went for a walk in the evening.
- June 30** I scaled down my drawing of the machine. After work, they gave out ration books. I was assigned to shop No. 5. Went for a walk, played billiards.
- July 2** At 4 a.m. I was summoned to the District Committee of the Komsomol. I tore up the summons: I was in Kirovsky village. After work at the institute, I went for a walk and read stories by Zoshchenko.
- July 5** Went to work as always at 8:30. Continued making detailed drawings of a vibrator. Dug trenches for two hours after work. In the evening I swam at the water station.
- July 8** After work we had training in anti-aircraft and anti-chemical defense. Got home late. Went for a walk. Today I joined the people's militia.
- July 11** Didn't sleep all night, but went to work in the morning as usual. At 7 o'clock in the evening I did military training in our institute's people's militia. Swam with a friend near the water station. We got back home at about 11 p.m.
- July 12** Worked at the institute, after that did military training in the people's militia. Went for a walk in the evening. There was an air raid warning tonight.
- July 14** Today I turned 17 years old. Worked at the institute until 5 p.m. Received my pay. Went for a walk, went swimming.
- July 16** In the morning there was an air raid, at the end of which I went to the District Committee of the Komsomol and was given a character reference. In the evening I read The Tale of a Time of Troubles by A. Tolstoy. Swam at the water station.

Source: <https://prozhito.org/person/2576>



- August 1** A boring day. Went for a walk. Queued up for gingerbread in the evening. Read a book.
- August 9** Went for a walk, and went to school, where I got a pass letting me walk around the city during an air raid warning. Enrolled in the fire brigade. In the evening I read *The History of My Contemporary*.
- September 1** In the morning I did exercises with dumbbells. Went for a walk. Read *The History of My Contemporary*, and at 4 o'clock went to school: it was the start of a new school year. We'll be studying for now in the evenings, in the building of the engineering technical school. In the evening after school I swam with my comrades and went for a walk.
- September 2** Did exercises with dumbbells in the morning. Did my homework, went for a walk, read *My Contemporary*, and by 5 o'clock I was on my way to school. In the evening I swam with my comrades at the water station and went for a walk.
- September 8** Worked with dumbbells in the morning, finished my homework, went for a walk, and went to school. In the evening I went to the District Committee of the Komsomol and enrolled in a fighter battalion.
- September 13** Worked with dumbbells in the morning. Spent from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the shooting range, where our squad was trained in shooting and throwing grenades. Read *The History of My Contemporary*. Listened to a report by the Secretary of the Komsomol Central Committee in building RU №1 summarising the war so far against German fascism. Went for a walk in the evening.
- September 18** From 6 to 10 a.m. and 6 to 10 p.m. I was on guard at the regional party committee. In between periods of duty I went for a walk and read *The History of My Contemporary*. Spent the night in the barracks, watched the film *The Little Humpbacked Horse*.

Valentina Shishlo (née Danilova)

Born into a military family on February 10, 1936 in the village of Belitsa, Zhlobin region, Belarussian SSR.

War

During the occupation, the Danilov family lived with the parents of Valentina's father, Fyodor Fyodorovich Danilov, in their house in Belitsa. In 1943, the German military moved them to the stables. The stables accommodated civilians driven out of Smolensk as well as the local population of Belitsa. Valentina Fyodorovna was eight years old when her mother Nina Fyodorovna and her five children were deported by the Wehrmacht to a camp near Ozarichi in March 1944. The Danilov family were on the road for three days, spending the nights under the open sky in a field fenced with barbed wire. People called the long road to Ozarichi 'the road of death'. All the time on the way to the camp, the Germans shot people who were unable to go any further.

The Ozarichi concentration camp in the Gomel region officially operated for only ten days. By order of the Wehrmacht, about 50,000 civilians were herded into small areas of marshy land. They were residents of the Gomel, Mogilev, and Polesie regions of Belarus, as well as the Smolensk and Oryol regions of Russia. The Nazis deliberately brought patients with typhus and other diseases to Ozarichi. People were infected, with the expectation that the infection would then spread to the advancing units of the Red Army. In the camp, Valentina's three younger brothers died: Garik, Marat and Boris. Valentina and her sister Klara survived thanks to their grandmother. Valentina Shishlo recalls:

'As soon as people entered the grounds of the camp, they found some kind of hillock to sit on and stayed there so as not to be sitting in the swamp. No food, no help, nothing ... They taunted us. They put bread on the table and then mined it. People were hungry. They went up to get a crust of bread and exploded. I saw it with my own eyes ...

'They knew we were sure to die. And we were dying: we were dying a terrible death. Hunger, cold, and typhus. [...] I remember my grandfather lying next to us. In the evening they were talking and in the morning he was dead. He was wearing a jacket, and people began to tear at him from all sides, trying to get the jacket. My grandmother wanted to put the children on it. Thanks to my grandmother, Lyalya and I survived, but all the boys died, and we buried them in rags - Garik, Marat and Boris. [...] Mama said we looked for some rags to wrap them in, and dug in the ground with our bare hands to bury them there.

'We didn't walk around the camp. If anyone tried to light a fire, the soldiers immediately started shooting. I was sick, very sick. My grandmother put a jacket under me. I lay on it, unable to go anywhere.

'Every year it becomes more difficult to remember and talk about what I went through. I had no childhood - the war took it. In the camp, my mother, grandmother, aunt, and my brothers survived as best we could. March was cold; it rained or snowed during the day, and it was frosty at night. There were no buildings on the grounds of the concentration camp; we were in the open air. Day and night we were guarded by German soldiers on watchtowers equipped with machine guns. Whenever anyone approached the barbed wire, they fired without warning. Many dead and wounded lay along the fence. There was no food, water or warm clothing. There were a lot of typhus patients around, and the disease spread quickly; people were dying. The dead lay next to the living. My three little brothers stayed there forever in the swamp. It was ten days of hell. March 19, when the camp was liberated by Soviet troops, I call my second birthday.'



After the war

After the war, Valentina graduated from secondary school and went on to a technical school, from which she also graduated. She worked as a technology specialist and then as a schoolteacher. As well as her work, Valentina Fyodorovna conducted excursions around the Khatyn memorial complex, and told visitors about the Ozarichi camps. Since the 1990s, Valentina Shishlo has regularly visited the memorial site in Ozarichi and given talks in schools. Since 2010, she has been the chairwoman of the Minsk association of Ozarichi prisoners. In 2015, Valentina Fyodorovna's granddaughter Inna passed on to Valentina a letter from the memorial complex of the concentration camp and the Dachau Museum saying that Valentina Fyodorovna's father Fyodor Fyodorovich Danilov had been killed at the SS Heberthausen training ground.

Zinaida Goryachko

Was born on June 11, 1931, and lived in the small village of Vysochany, Liozno district, Vitebsk region, Belarussian SSR.

Before the war

Ours was a working-class family. Dad was a carpenter, and Mama worked at the Karl Marx Flax Mill in the town of Vysochany, Liozno district.

War

One hot day in June 1941, returning home with bouquets of wildflowers, we heard women wailing. That's how the war began.

Life was very difficult. The factory had been blown up and the machinery had been taken to Russia so that the Nazis would not get hold of it. We did not have our own vegetable garden, and we lived on only one salary. Mama went round the villages and bartered clothes (editor's note: for food). In the summer, we ate only sorrel and berries. And sometimes we used potato peelings to bake flatbread. There was also unrest in the village. Many people who had been expelled by the Soviet authorities returned and went to the police. They became collaborators with the fascists.

In 1943, heavy fighting took place in our area, and the Germans had to retreat. They forced us to leave the village, so we had to abandon our homes. It was a cold autumn. We went on foot, and stopped for the night in a village. The Germans offered to take the children by car, but Mama refused.

They made us go to Masyukovshchina, where there was a camp for prisoners of war and displaced persons. From there, locked up in cattle wagons, we were taken to Germany. Once we had crossed the border, the doors of the wagons were opened, and clods of mud flew at us with shouts of 'Russisch Schweine'. We walked along the roads in Germany, accompanied by some of the Hitler Youth. We spent the nights in buildings where livestock were kept. It was warm there, as the Germans kept the animals clean and warm.

They brought us to the city of Siegen in North Rhine-Westphalia, where we were processed and placed in barracks. Families lived together; they were not separated. They immediately took me to the factory. There were about 7 of us teenagers, 12-13 years old. The foreman—and I remember his name and surname, Oscar Biller—said: 'One week, and you will be specialists.' That's how I found out about child labour, at the age of 12. My job was welding metal pipes. I can say that the foreman was a good person. He did not beat us, but he did scold us if we welded a joint badly. He seems to have understood that it was very difficult for us children.

My father was put to very hard work; he could barely drag his feet along in his wooden clogs. I felt very sorry for him, since our food consisted of a scoop of kohlrabi broth and a couple of tablespoons of green spinach. And then we were told that we were lucky. Earlier the food had been much worse.



A lot of young people died. The police kept watch on the barracks. I remember Otto and Wilhelm well. Otto was young and shouted a lot and brandished his baton, but Wilhelm liked actually beating us more than Otto did. My father did not want to go to the bunker during the American air raids. He said it was better to die than to drag out such an existence. Before liberation, we were herded into the bunker and shut in. There was not enough oxygen, and we began to suffocate. Mama, Dad and I said goodbye and prepared to face death. One of the prisoners found a way out along the streams that flowed from the mountains, and came for us. We went out along a narrow passage which stretched for some distance into the mountain.

Coming out of the bunker and taking a breath of fresh air, we fell and lost consciousness. After a while, we woke up and saw cars with American soldiers. That same day, we left the camp. We were taken to the Black Forest, where we spent a week at the American unit's base. We were fed pea soup.

After the war

We were handed over to our own Soviet troops, registered, and returned to our homeland. Our village had been burned down. We found a dugout in the village of Buraki and turned it into a home. Mother and father worked in peat mining. I went to school. I enrolled in the 5th year, since I had finished the 4th year during the war. We were starving again. There was a field with frozen potatoes that had not been dug; we fetched them in and baked flatbread.

In June 1942, the Krzemieniec Lyceum swarmed with young people and their parents. The end of the school year. Shows, presentations and the awarding of certificates. Who would have thought that those doors would be closed to pupils for such a long time.

The Germans took over Krzemieniec during the holidays. The Lyceum building was turned into a hospital. We were forbidden to enter. The occupiers piled up all the papers and the contents of the library and burned them. None of the authorities thought about the education of the youth, who had to work and leave for Germany.

Somehow, I managed to get out of having to work. I wanted to learn, but where? One school was open where the teaching language was Ukrainian, but Poles were not welcome there and were in danger of being harassed. I studied at home under my mommy's supervision. That didn't last long because she had to go to work and I took care of the house. I read books, copied out readers and did mathematical exercises whenever I had free time after the housework, so as not to forget what I had learned at school.

One day my friends came to see me and told me that they were studying. Of course, it had to stay a secret. I was overcome with jealousy. They were studying and I wasn't. When mommy came back from work, I told her about everything and asked her if I could go and study with my friends. When she agreed, we went together to my friend's home, where the lessons were being held. I was accepted into the class.

There were seven of us girls and four boys and we were taught by Professor Karol Lach. He was a short man with a pince-nez and a vast range of knowledge. We listened to his lectures on literature and history with great pleasure. Mathematics and Latin were more tedious.

Our lessons took place between 5 and 7 p.m. When the classes finished, we quickly split up and hurried back to our individual homes so as not to draw the attention of the police units walking the streets. We were only allowed to be outside until 7 p.m. Sometimes we waited in vain for the Professor to arrive. The next day we found out that he couldn't come because he was being watched and so he had had to walk in a big circle and scurry back home through the dark alleyways.

When my friend's house was being observed, the lessons were held at someone else's place, often at our home. It was a safe place because we lived on a side street at the top of a hill in a so-called "collective manor house". The Germans didn't push so hard for that place because they were afraid. That lasted until March 1943. Our classes took place without textbooks, in the most primitive way possible.

The authorities declared a state of emergency in 1943. Our meetings were interrupted by frequent inspections, manhunts and strict bans on moving about in the evenings without a permit. The parents, worried about us, and the Professor, worried about himself, advised us to put the lessons on hold for the time being. That time drew out to the point where everyone from our group left Krzemieniec, only to return there in our thoughts from various corners of Poland.

Source: *Moje przeżycia wojenne. Wypracowania dzieci z 1946 roku* // Instytut Solidarności i Męstwa im. Witolda Pileckiego. Pp. 134-135. <https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/publikacje/moje-przezycia-wojenne-wypracowania-dzieci-z-1946-roku>



Jadwiga O.
Born in 1925, Drohobycz district,
Lviv voivodeship, Poland.

On April 13, 1940 I was deported to a kolkhoz (collective farm) in Kazakhstan with my mother Maria and brother Jerzy, where we were forced to work under threat of starvation. I was not able to support my family with the money I earned, and this meant that we often went without food, and our health deteriorated. The working conditions were very difficult for me, because I was only 15 years old, and I had to do the hardest work in order to provide at least some support for the family. Mama did almost no work—she was too old to work, and my brother was still only a child (he was 10 years old), and so could not work either. So I could not count on my mother or my brother earning anything. I worked everywhere: in the fields, in the garden, and in the stables. The work in the field was hard, because every day I had to walk to my work place, about 5 kilometers, and I could not be late, because if you were late for work you risked losing your job and might even be taken to court. A trial in court usually carried the risk of several years in prison.

Living conditions were very bad. I lived in a derelict old house. The roof let in every drop of rain, so you can imagine what it was like during the spring thaw. I worked all winter in the stables, which was not light work. I had to feed and clean 53 animals all by myself, and that included 15 oxen and 4 camels. At first it was very hard for me, because I had not had anything to do with horses or oxen before, and even less so camels, and all of a sudden I had to work with them on my own. I was frequently kicked by a horse, camels spat at me, and an ox gored me with its horn. One time I had to spend two weeks in bed with a broken rib. When I was better I was forced to go back to work; no one cared what happened to me. I put up with it all calmly, consoling myself that it would not be forever. We lived in terrible misery, consoling one another with the hope that it had to end. Finally the day we had waited for so patiently arrived—the day the amnesty was announced. But after the amnesty was proclaimed, they didn't want to release us from work, and the way they treated us did not change. The most awful thing was that they didn't want to let us leave the kolkhoz. I saved my family from further suffering by helping us all escape at night. Those who did not manage to escape stayed there and they are still suffering...

Source: War Through Children's Eyes: The Soviet Occupation of Poland and the Deportations, 1939–1941 (Kindle Edition), by Jan T. Gross (Author), Irena Grudzin'ska-Gross (Editor), Bruno Bettelheim (Foreword), Ronald Strom (Translator), Dan Rivers (Translator)// https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07VJJTCPB/ref=nav_timeline_asin?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1



Gerda Altpeter (née Rappaport)

Born in 1926, from Essen, a city in the Ruhr region and the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

Gerda's father, Philip Rappaport, was a civil engineer and urban planner who was well-known outside Germany. He was the director of the Union of Mining Communities in the Ruhr Coal Region [author's note: a union engaged in the planning and construction of mining communities in the Ruhr Region]. This meant that Gerda and her three older brothers grew up in prosperous conditions.

In 1933, the carefree life of the family ended abruptly. Despite the fact that the Rappaports had converted to the Protestant faith back in the 1880s, the National Socialists considered Philip to be a Jew according to the criteria of their racial ideology. That meant that Philip's children were so-called 'Mischlings of the first degree'. A few months after the National Socialists came to power, Philip lost his job.

[...] National Socialism was gradually seeping into everyday life at the Maria Vechtler School. 'In the fifth year, almost all the girls were in the "Young Girls' League", and all wore uniforms. And we all had to line up in the corridor when Hitler or Mussolini or Ludendorff, Goering or whoever else came [...]

Gerda Altpeter had to put up with her classmates asking, 'Why haven't you joined yet? You need to join us!' Gerda's parents bought her a black skirt and blouse so that she would not be so conspicuous at parades next to the girls in uniforms. She could not, however, join the 'Young Girls' League'. 'I found it strange that I was not a member, and I kept telling my mother, "I want to be in it too!" At first, her mother simply refused without explaining why. 'And then in the sixth grade, she finally said why not: "You can't. Your father is a Jew. Your grandparents were Jewish."'

Because of her Jewish ancestors, Gerda Rappaport was not allowed to join the 'League of German Girls' or the 'Young Girls' League'. [...] It became obvious to the girls who were members of these organizations that Gerda was excluded and was not their friend. 'It got more and more difficult with my classmates, because they kept asking and insisting all the time. And when they realized what the reason was, they sometimes behaved very unpleasantly.'

Walking home after school was even worse. 'Boys from the Hitler Youth did all sorts of nasty things on the street. I was hit hard a couple of times, but I didn't give up without a fight. There were many thorny bushes in the city forest park. I ran through them, and my followers were spiked, and couldn't keep up with me.' For her own safety, Gerda had to walk home the long way, along the main streets, where passers-by could help her.

In addition, she was helped by an old Jewish proverb, which her father had taught her: 'Turn your enemies into friends and you will live.' She began to offer her classmates help with their homework. She helped the mother of one of the ringleaders of the Hitler Youth who lived in the neighborhood. 'You could walk down the street with her, and the boys from the Hitler Youth didn't say anything, they just looked at me sullenly. And since then, no one has attacked me. She was very grateful to me, and really seemed to want me to be left in peace.' [...]

In the summer of 1942, Gerda and her youngest brother Werner-Karl prematurely stopped going to school. She was sixteen when the summer holidays started, and at that time there was no sign of trouble. 'Suddenly it turned out that new laws had been passed' - laws that prohibited the so-called 'mischlings' from attending school beyond the seventh year.



Immediately after the end of the holidays, Gerda was summoned to the office of the deputy headmaster of the Maria Wechtler School. Like the headmaster, he was a committed National Socialist, but both of them respected Gerda, who was a good student. 'I'm terribly sorry,' the deputy head apologized. But could being sorry be expected to replace Gerda's school? 'For me it was a terrible blow. I tried to continue studying on my own.' But she now had to work, as part of her compulsory year's service, and that stopped her from concentrating on her studies. [...]

The plight of Gerda and her family was exacerbated by the increasingly frequent and ever heavier bombing of the industrial city of Essen. The Rappaports were not allowed to seek shelter in public bomb shelters, and during heavy bombing they had to hide in the basement of their house. Today Gerda Altpeter understands that the constant bombardment, lack of sleep at night, and the incessant threat to life 'drove her to despair' physically and mentally.

She did not notice that during the same period, the first deportations from the Rhineland to concentration camps and extermination camps in the east had begun. But over time, the threat became more acute, including to her own family. From 1941, her father had to wear the Star of David. 'He almost never went outside, except perhaps to worship, and then he hid it under his collar.' [...]

After completing her year's compulsory service, on October 1, 1943 Gerda was given a job at the Goldschmidt AG chemical plant in Essen. She worked as an assistant in a chemical laboratory, and participated in experiments in iron refining. This work was 'extremely interesting.' But by the end of 1943, the department had been evacuated from Essen, which was subjected to heavy bombing, to Villach, in Austria.

Escape from her own deportation: 'I should have been taken away'

One day, Gerda went to work and was sent straight to the head of Human Resources. He bluntly announced to the surprised girl: 'You are sick! Go to your doctor.' Although she was not sick, Gerda did as she was told. The doctor said the same thing: 'Yes, you are sick.' He gave Gerda a certificate saying she was sick with something she had never heard of, and sent her to a sanatorium. Only much later did Gerda find out what happened. Her doctor often spent his evenings drinking with members of the Gestapo, from whom he heard that Gerda was in imminent danger. He told his friend, the head of Human Resources, who, in turn, warned Gerda.

Thanks to the help of both men, she managed to avoid deportation, and she and her mother set off to stay with relatives in the city of Bad Salzuflen. But as the railway service was interrupted during the war, they ended up in Hiddesen, with her uncle's family.

Her mother later returned to Essen on her own, and learned that the order for Gerda's deportation had indeed been sent to the house. But the housekeeper, without giving the matter a second's thought, had sent the letter back marked 'Gone away'. Gerda returned a few weeks later. The doctor who had warned her gave her the all-clear: the central headquarters of the Gestapo had been destroyed in a bombing raid, and all the documents had been destroyed. She was no longer in danger of being deported.

Cologne, 1944

August 3

[...] It's the holidays now! The long summer vacation we look forward to every year, eight whole weeks! But this year they are even more clouded than in previous years. The carefree times have gone. Now we have to go out to work more often than not. Lots of people are complaining and whining because they can't have their long holidays by the sea or in the mountains, but there are always people like that - people who simply don't want to do this kind of work.

I must say that I'm very happy with the work I've been given to do this year. For almost four weeks now I've been a tram conductor. Yes, a real conductor, a very young one, of course, only 16 years old, and with long braids. But that's okay. I would never have thought that constantly driving back and forth would make me so happy. Every morning, very early, at 5.07, I leave on line 11 and ride back and forth between the cathedral and South Park. In the morning the trams are still very empty, of course. Just occasionally a worker or a newspaperman (they get up especially early) comes into my carriage and greets me with a grumpy 'Gmorning.' But it's so beautiful to drive through the sleepy city early in the morning.

In Marienburg [author's note: in the Cologne area] I see the sun rising slowly over the gentle green of the trees. It's so huge and radiant it makes me want to sing for joy. The birds are lucky - they can twitter and sing their songs without a care. In the city, you see the sun through the ruins, and there isn't the same joy from seeing it rise. When I see the sun's rays touching the ruins I don't feel like saying anything. The ruins of Severinstrasse are particularly flabbergasting.

From 7 to 8 o'clock in the morning, the trams become more and more full, and sometimes there are so many people packed into the car that I can't make my way through. That signals the start of all the jokes. Someone pulls my braids, but I don't let myself get distracted. I collect all the fares, and often, perhaps even too often, they give me a tip, which always embarrasses me. It's true: I've really fallen in love with my tram.

When my friends hear that I'm working on the tram, they often ask me if I get a lot of trouble, and if passengers or colleagues harass me. It's a strange question, really; the answer's No, not a bit; not once during all these weeks have I had any trouble. On the contrary! People are very friendly, laughing, joking and even helping me.

When there are so many people packed into the car that I can no longer go back or forward, someone will always calm me down by calling out, 'Don't worry, young lady, I'll ring the bell!' Or a colleague who's already finished his shift will jump on the tram, grin, and take over the bell or the platform. No, people really are all nice and ready to help. I'm very happy. There are so many splendid stories of things that happen on the tram. I couldn't possibly tell them all. You could write a whole book about it.



But often there are moments when the misery of our times becomes visible. When a disabled person, crippled by the war, gets into the carriage and looks around with obvious weariness and despair. We're OK; we still have our legs and arms, and our faces are undamaged and fresh. We see a lot suffering—but even then we can't be sad or show that we're sad. We need to be cheerful and try to share our joyful mood with people who are so much worse off.

And then there are times when it's dangerous. It's usually 10 o'clock when the air raid sirens go off. When the sirens start to howl, the tram is always in different places. It becomes very uncomfortable. People start to get terribly nervous, and rush to get out of the tram, and I see clearly over and over again that no one else thinks about other people; they all think only about themselves and their own safety. You can't blame people for this. When the shelling begins, I go cold with fear, and most of all I would like to be at home, in our little bunker. But I'm not at home, and I have to be resilient. We're often anxious, bombs often fall, but in recent years we've become used to the feeling. Quite often the anxiety begins just at the end of my shift, when I'm waiting for my replacement and I'm dog tired. More than once I've arrived at the tram station to count up the money two, three, or even four hours after the end of my shift. Well, I curse, and of course, I always count it up wrong.

This is what my work looks like this year, and I like it much more than last year's work as a postman. I'm glad I managed to get such a good job and can help a little on days like this. [...]

September 10 Early in the morning, at 7 o'clock, workmen came to us from a factory in Frechen [author's note: a city in North Rhine-Westphalia] and put a wall safe in the basement for our most essential things. I put my case with my favorite books in there. It's like the Thirty Years' War. The only thing we haven't done is bury our silver and valuables in the garden. In fact, my mother even suggested that we should!

It's gradually become usual for enemy aircraft to fill the sky above us and sometimes, with an incredible howl, they swoop down and fire on the civilian population. The alarm sounds all day, we run all day, but you quickly get used to it, and you rush to hide in the basement only if the noises sound too close and it becomes dangerous.

From tomorrow I'll be working at a military factory! On Friday I was sent [...] to work at Puffrat, a company which has a military production unit and employs schoolgirls. There are three barracks housing monstrous machines. We'll be sent to work there. The noise is deafening. I remember those barracks as caves black with soot, stinking of carbide. Can it really be that people can work there, no, can people even breathe in there, and will I really have to do it from tomorrow?! When I think about it, I start to hesitate - oh, what nonsense I'm writing—I'll cope somehow!

News came today that a big battle is underway for Liege [author's note: a city in Belgium]. The front is getting closer: how is this all going to end? We can hear the rumble of guns. It's a strange feeling in the dark evenings to hear a monotonous growl in the west. No, it is better not to think, I mustn't think, just don't think about the boys, my brothers, who might be going through all those horrors at the front. It's good that there is so much work to do. [...]

September 24 Another week has passed. Schumann's wonderful piano concerto has just been broadcast on the radio. His music makes me feel so good! Ah, when peace comes again, I want to play that concerto. It's so beautiful, and I can feel how it softens me. I look at my hands, though, and laugh. Play Schumann with these hands?! They're so ugly, covered with burns and calluses, and so hard that I can barely hold a pen. Today I'm in bed, because yesterday I got back home terribly tired, and tomorrow I have to go back to work. My work on two machines is going very well. I need to push myself as hard as I can to get everything done in time; we're working so well as a team that if I fall behind, others will have to stop work.

On Friday, I received my first pay. 37 pfennigs per hour. Much more modest than my huge tram earnings. Yesterday, we workers who do long hours of hard work received additional food ration cards. There's something to be proud of! Finally, news came from Klaus on August 17 from Saint-Lô [author's note: a town in France] - he was still fine when he wrote, at least. No letters from Hansel for a long time [...]

Gertrud Zillikens (née Riediger)
Born May 19, 1933, in Braunsberg
(now Braniewo, Poland) in East Prussia, Germany.

'My father was in the war. He was very rarely at home. He meant everything to me.'

Gertrud's father died in the war at the age of 39.

During the war, Gertrud lived in Braunsberg with her two sisters, Hedwig (born 1930) and Angelika (born 1935), and her mother Katharina (born 1910). For a long time, they saw nothing of the war, and for the first part of the war, they suffered no shortages of anything. Things changed when they went to see their father Otto in his soldiers' barracks in Königsberg and saw a bomb go off with their own eyes. Gertrud was shocked; she couldn't get her head round the horror she was seeing around her. 'It was really terrifying. There were people who had phosphor on their clothes, and they were jumping into the Pregel. When they came out of the river they were still burning. Burning people were running through the town. It was awful, simply awful. I couldn't understand that something like that could happen.'

The day after this horrible incident in Königsberg, Braunsberg suffered its first air raid. This was another decisive event. Air raid sirens were heard in Braunsberg. Luckily, the area in which the Riediger family was living was unaffected. But after the attack, their aunt and her son went to live with Gertrud's family; their house on Bahnhofstrasse had been completely destroyed.

Gertrud's mother had psychological and physical problems, and she slowly began to lose her grip. The spring of 1945 marked the beginning of a time when Gertrud, who had not yet turned twelve, had to take more responsibility for her mother and sisters. The front line was fast coming closer. Gauleiter Koch imposed a strict ban on fleeing East Prussia, and this ban was also enforced in Braunsberg. 'We were not allowed to flee. We were not allowed to leave.' This ban remained in place even after the attack on Braunsberg.

It appears that Katharina Riediger became unable to take vital decisions. She refused to leave the flat, meaning she would not leave Braunsberg or East Prussia. Little Gertrud tried to argue: 'I said: "Mama, everyone here has already left. Mama, we have to go!"' At the same time, Gertrud quite literally saw what they could expect in the near future: she looked out of the window through binoculars, and: 'We saw Russian tanks coming down from Frauenburg.'

By this time, Braunsberg had been largely destroyed by air raids and artillery fire. When the Red Army entered the city on March 20, 1945, about 80 percent of the small town was in ruins. This is how Gertrud Zillikens described the drama of what happened to them when the Red Army arrived: 'They came to my mother and said, "You must leave immediately. No luggage, nothing! Leave with what you have in your hands." We even didn't take a change of clothes.' Gertrud was horrified.



Gertrud's mother continued to refuse to leave, giving her eldest daughter Hedwig's serious illness as her reason. She explained to the soldier that her daughter would die if she had to flee. But the soldier remained adamant. 'You have to!' He didn't waste any words. 'If you don't go, I'll put a gun to your chest! You have to! You have children. You have to go.' They yielded to the inevitable. 'At that point, we left.' They took hardly anything with them, just a few things: they had to carry everything in their hands. It was winter, though, and cold, so they put on as many layers of clothing as possible.

They travelled from Braunsberg to Pillau, and from there they went by boat to a refugee camp in Denmark. At the end of 1947, it was announced that anyone with relatives in Germany could travel to Germany to join their relatives. Katharina Riediger claimed to have a relative in Germany, though actually she didn't. The family was allowed to leave. They went first to Niederbreisig on the Rhine, and from there Gertrud went with her mother and sisters to Hochneukirchen. There, Gertrud settled and was able to start a new life.