

PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES · STUDENT HANDOUT

THE WEISSMANDL RESCUES

He bribed a mass murderer to buy time, cabled the free world for help that never came, and could not save his own family. The 90-second portrait of Rabbi Weissmandl and the question of what rescue is when your power is not enough.

GRADES 11–12

STEP 1 OF 4 · BEFORE VIEWING

Before we begin

Beginning in 1942, the Bratislava Working Group — led by Gisi Fleischmann, with Rabbi Weissmandl as its chief strategist — tried to halt the deportation of Slovak Jews. Its methods were negotiation and deception: it bribed SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny with tens of thousands of dollars and forged letters from a fictitious Swiss official — named in Abraham Fuchs’s account as “Ferdinand Roth.” For nearly two years, the deportation trains from Slovakia stopped.

“He begged his wife and children to jump — and jumped first to show them it was possible. They could not. He went alone.”

— The narration of *The Weissmandl Rescues*, on the sealed cattle car, October 1944

Hold two disciplines as you watch. First, causation is contested: historians document that the trains stopped, but dispute whether the bribery stopped them. Second, credit is shared: Fleischmann led; Weissmandl strategized — she is not a footnote. The film is asking you to sit inside a rescue that saved thousands and a loss it could not prevent.



*Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl (1903–1957), chief strategist of the Bratislava Working Group. Source: USHMM / YIVO.
Film animation is not yet locked; images here are archival references, not final frames.*

Vocabulary

Bratislava Working Group

A clandestine Jewish–Christian rescue network in wartime Slovakia (*Pracovná skupina*). Gisi Fleischmann led it; Weissmandl was its chief strategist.

Slovak Ransom (local bribery)

The Working Group's *local* 1942–43 effort inside Slovakia: it bribed SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny and forged official-looking letters. This coincided with the nearly two-year pause in deportations — a documented outcome whose cause historians still dispute.

Europa Plan

The separate, *larger* 1943 proposal to ransom the remaining Jews of all Nazi-occupied Europe by paying the SS a very large sum (figures of two to three million dollars are cited). Unlike the local Slovak bribery, the Europa Plan mostly failed: the negotiations collapsed and the sweeping rescue never came.

Forgery

The making of false documents to deceive. The group forged letters in the name of a Swiss official who did not exist — a name preserved in Abraham Fuchs's account as "Ferdinand Roth" — to make its ransom scheme appear backed by powerful international organizations.

Auschwitz Protocols

A detailed 1944 report of the mass murder at Auschwitz, assembled from escapees' testimony. Weissmandl helped circulate it and cabled the free world begging for action, including an appeal to bomb the rail lines to Auschwitz. (Background — not depicted in the film.)

Contested Causation

When historians agree on *what* happened but dispute *why*. The trains stopped (documented outcome), but scholars disagree over whether the bribery caused it (contested cause).

Historiography

The study of how history is written — whose accounts survive, who gets credited, and why interpretations of the same evidence differ (as in the “Bauer dispute” over crediting the Working Group’s strategists).

Anticipation

BEFORE YOU WATCH

The Working Group bribed an SS officer responsible for tens of thousands of deportations, while Weissmandl cabled the free world with reports of the murder at Auschwitz, begging that the rail lines be bombed. Nobody answered. Two questions to bring to the film: Was it right to bargain with a mass murderer to buy time? And what do we owe a story in which the same man saved thousands of strangers yet could not save his own wife and five children? Come prepared to defend an interpretation.

Heads-up before pressing play

The film is 90 seconds. It concerns the Holocaust and the murder of Weissmandl’s wife and five children, and the moral dilemma of negotiating with the SS. It does not depict violence on screen — the family is shown only through silhouette and absence, and Birkenau appears only as architecture: empty rails, a closing door, a distant gate, smoke.

A note for you: If any part of this is hard for you, that is a reasonable response — you can step away, and you can tell your teacher.

View the Microshort — 90 seconds

Watch in full without writing — ideally **twice: once for feeling, once for detail**. The notes come after.

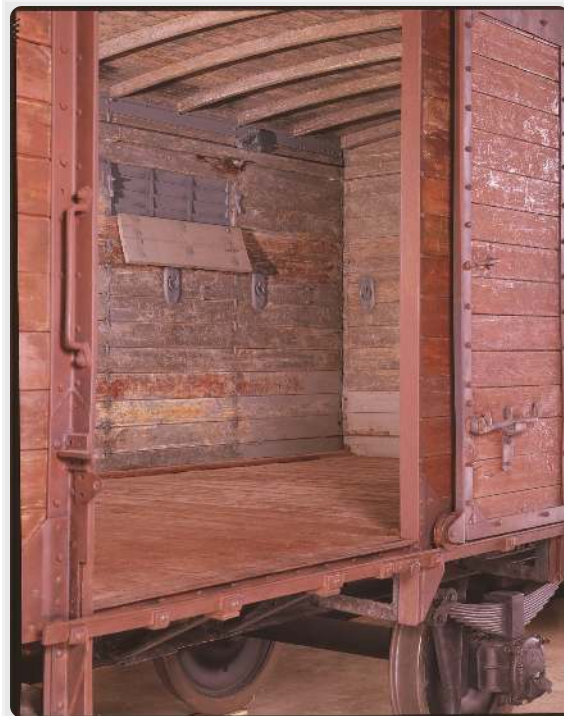
Watch: projectwitness.org/videos/microshort-ep6-weissmandl



Scan with any phone camera, or paste the link into a browser.

STEP 2 OF 4 • AFTER VIEWING

Analyze



The interior of a cattle car, light through the slats. In the dark of a sealed car like this, Weissmandl sawed through the lock with a wire he had hidden in a loaf of bread. Archival reference; film visuals in progress.

Rhetorical & Historiographic Analysis

1. The film states a documented outcome ("the deportation trains from Slovakia stopped for two years") while withholding a contested cause (that the bribe stopped them). What is gained by refusing a causal claim the evidence cannot secure? What would be lost by asserting it?
2. The narration must honor a rescue that saved thousands and a loss it could not prevent. Analyze how it manages that double obligation: *"He begged his wife and children to jump — and jumped first to show them it was possible. They could not. He went alone."* What keeps this from collapsing into either heroism or pity?
3. Weissmandl bribed a mass murderer to buy time while cabling the free world to bomb the rail lines. Compare the two acts — negotiating with the perpetrator versus appealing to bystanders who did not answer. What does the comparison reveal about the range of rescue available in 1944?
4. Historians have disputed how much strategic credit belongs to an Orthodox Slovak rabbi versus other members of the group (the "Bauer dispute"). What is at stake in deciding who is remembered as the mind behind a rescue, and how do the surviving sources shape the answer?
5. "He could not save them. He did not abandon them." Evaluate this as a historical claim, not only a moral one. What specific evidence supports the distinction between *could not save* and *abandoned*?

STEP 3 OF 4 • CREATIVE RESPONSE

Create



A loaf of Slovak country bread. Weissmandl hid an emery wire-saw inside a stale loaf, then used it to cut through the cattle-car lock. Archival reference; film visuals in progress.

Analytical Essay • Rescue at Scale and the Intimate Failure

Weissmandl helped save thousands of strangers, yet could not save his own wife and five children. The film's load-bearing frame is *"He could not save them. He did not abandon them."* Write an analytical essay (350–450 words) that addresses the following:

PROMPT

Analyze the relationship between rescue at scale and the intimate failure — or, alternatively, the ethics of "morally compromised collaboration," bribing the SS to buy time. When is a compromised act still a rescue? What does it mean to keep going after a loss you could not prevent? What does this history teach about the limits and the reach of one person's resistance?

Make a clear argumentative claim and use specific evidence: the saws distributed at Seréd', the wire hidden in the loaf, the forged "Ferdinand Roth" letters, the documented two-year pause, and the murders at Birkenau. Preserve the discipline of documented outcome versus contested cause.

How your work will be looked at

SINGLE-POINT RUBRIC · YOUR ANALYTICAL ESSAY

CRITERIA	EVIDENCE OF MEETING THE STANDARD	AREA TO GROW
Thesis / argument	A precise, defensible thesis on rescue-and-loss or morally-compromised collaboration — not a restatement of the prompt.	
Evidence	Marshals specific, well-chosen evidence from the film and the historical record to support each move.	
Analysis & evaluation	Interprets and weighs the evidence; evaluates competing readings rather than merely listing them.	
Historiographic awareness	Names what is contested or uncertain (the disputed cause; the “Bauer dispute” over credit) and treats it as such.	
Historical accuracy	Facts, names, and sequence are correct; documented outcome kept distinct from contested cause throughout.	

This is a *single-point* rubric: the middle column is the target. Use the last column to note one concrete thing to strengthen — from your teacher, a partner, or yourself.

STEP 4 OF 4 · CLOSING

Reflect

🕒 60-SECOND RECALL · NOT GRADED

Quick check before you reflect

Cover the meanings and see if you can match each term from memory — then check yourself:

- **Slovak Ransom (local bribery)** — the 1942–43 local effort that coincided with the pause
- **Europa Plan** — the larger 1943 all-Europe ransom that mostly failed
- **Auschwitz Protocols** — the 1944 report of the murder at Auschwitz
- **Bauer dispute** — the scholarly argument over who to credit

Order the geography. Put these in the order they appear in Weissmandl's story: *Auschwitz · Nitra · Seréd' · Bratislava · Mount Kisco (New York)*. (Check: Nitra → Bratislava → Seréd' → Auschwitz; then escape and rebuilding → Mount Kisco.)

Open-Ended Reflection • Rescue, Compromise, and Memory

Weissmandl worked inside a machinery he could not overthrow. He used the tools available: negotiation, forgery, a wire hidden in bread, saws pressed into strangers' hands. He bought time by paying a mass murderer. He saved thousands and could not save his own family. He wept day and night for the rest of his life — and he rebuilt a yeshiva that still teaches today.

Write a sustained reflection (one page) on the following:

REFLECTION PROMPT

When is a morally compromised act still a rescue? Weigh the documented outcome (the trains stopped) against the contested cause (whether the bribe stopped them), and the thousands saved against the family lost. What do we owe a rescuer whose most famous success cannot be cleanly attributed and whose deepest loss could not be prevented? And what does the answer ask of us, as people who engage with this history now?

There is no single right answer. The goal is to think rigorously and honestly about the relationship between historical evidence, moral judgment, and memory.

“He could not save them. The yeshiva still teaches.”

— Project Witness, *The Weissmandl Rescues* (end card). The Nitra Yeshiva in Mount Kisco, New York, founded 1949, operates today.

If this brings up something difficult, a school counselor or a trusted adult is available to talk with you.

Project Witness · Microshort Stories

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