

PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES · STUDENT HANDOUT

THE WEISSMANDL RESCUES

A 90-second portrait of Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandl, who helped stop the deportation trains in Slovakia and taught strangers to save their way to freedom — and who could not save his own family, but did not abandon them.

GRADES 7–8

STEP 1 OF 4 · BEFORE VIEWING

Before we begin

Before any image, two things to hold. **Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandl** was a scholar from **Nitra, Slovakia**. He was part of a secret rescue network called the **Bratislava Working Group** — led by his relative Gisi Fleischmann, with Weissmandl as its chief strategist — that worked to stop the deportation of Slovak Jews to Nazi camps. This lesson is about what he did with the chances he had, and about the one thing he could not do.



*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 secret Jewish–Christian rescue network in wartime Slovakia. Gisi Fleischmann led it; Weissmandl was its chief strategist. It worked to stop the deportation of Slovak Jews.

Deportation

When people are forced from their homes and loaded onto trains to be sent to Nazi camps.

Transit Camp

A holding camp where prisoners were kept before being sent on to a death camp. Weissmandl was held at the Seréd' transit camp after his arrest.

Rescuer ("upstander")

Someone who uses their own safety to protect a person in danger, instead of standing by. Julius Natali, a Slovak Christian, hid Weissmandl until liberation. *A note on the word:* you may hear "upstander," but many historians prefer *rescuer* — real choices under terror were harder than a simple "bystander or upstander" label suggests.

Yeshiva

A school for the study of Torah and Talmud. After the war, Weissmandl rebuilt his family's yeshiva on a farm in Mount Kisco, New York.

WHERE & WHEN · A QUICK MAP IN WORDS

Nitra → **Bratislava** → **Seréd'** → **Auschwitz**

then the escape → hidden in Slovakia → after the war → **Mount Kisco, New York**

Timeline: Weissmandl's home was **Nitra**, Slovakia. The rescue work centered on **Bratislava**. After his arrest he was held at the **Seréd'** transit camp, then put on a train toward **Auschwitz** in occupied Poland. He escaped, was hidden until liberation, and after the war rebuilt the yeshiva in **Mount Kisco, New York**, where it still teaches.

Anticipation

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Can a person be a rescuer and still be unable to save everyone — even the people closest to them? Weissmandl helped stop deportation trains and handed saws to strangers so they could cut their way free. When the Nazis put him and his own family on a train, he did everything in his power to try to save them, too. In the end he could not — but he never abandoned them, and he carried that grief for the rest of his life. Write two or three sentences before you watch: what do you think it costs a person to keep going after a loss like that?

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.

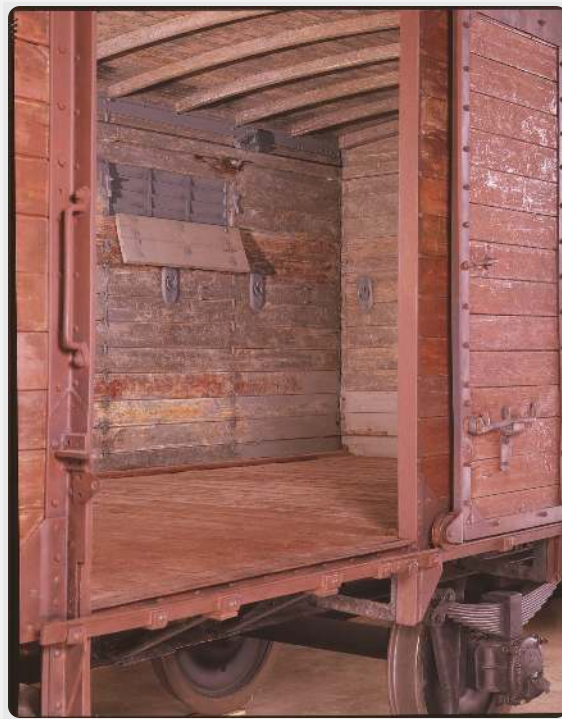
Watch: projectwitness.org/videos/microshort-ep6-weissmandl



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.

Comprehension & Visual Storytelling

1. Who was Rabbi Weissmandl, and what was the Bratislava Working Group?
2. Who led the Working Group, and what was Weissmandl's role in it?
3. At the Seréd' transit camp, what did Weissmandl give to strangers, and what did he teach them to do?
4. In the sealed cattle car, how did he get the lock open? What did he beg his family to do, and what happened?
5. The film never shows the faces of his wife and children, and never says his wife's name. Why do you think the filmmakers honor them through absence instead of showing them?

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.

Letter Writing

BEFORE YOU WRITE — THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. You are a prisoner at the Seréd' transit camp, waiting to be loaded onto a train, and you do not know what is at the other end.
2. A rabbi you have never met risks his own life to press a small saw into your hand and whisper how to use it.
3. That saw is a chance — not a promise. It might work; it might not.

Now write your letter. Use one specific thing from the list above. Don't worry about getting every fact perfect; we will work on the history together afterward.

Imagine you are that prisoner at Seréd' in 1944. Write a short letter to a family member describing the moment a stranger handed you a saw and told you how to cut your way off the train.

Your letter should include:

- What life in the camp has been like, and what you fear is coming.
- What you felt when a stranger risked everything to give you a chance.
- What you hope — and what you are still afraid of.

Write 1–2 paragraphs. Try to capture both the fear and the small, stubborn hope of that moment.

LETTER PLANNER · JOT A FEW WORDS IN EACH LINE FIRST

Fill these in before you write — then turn them into sentences.

Who am I writing to?

What has camp been like? What do I fear is coming?

What happened when a stranger handed me a saw?

What do I hope — and what am I still afraid of?

How will I close the letter?

How your work will be looked at

SINGLE-POINT RUBRIC · YOUR LETTER

CRITERIA	EVIDENCE OF MEETING THE STANDARD	AREA TO GROW
Historical accuracy	Details fit what we learned: the Seréd' transit camp, the saw handed to a stranger, 1944 Slovakia. Nothing invented that contradicts the record.	
Perspective & empathy	Writes convincingly from inside the moment — real fear and real, stubborn hope — without turning the person into a symbol.	
Letter conventions & voice	Reads as a real letter (greeting, close), 1–2 paragraphs, in a consistent first-person voice; clear enough to follow.	

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:

- **Bratislava Working Group** — the secret rescue network in Slovakia
- **Transit camp** — the holding camp (Seréd') before the death camps
- **Yeshiva** — the Torah academy Weissmandl rebuilt in New York
- **Julius Natali** — the Slovak Christian who hid Weissmandl

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.)

One-Sentence Takeaway

Write the single most important thing you are taking away from this lesson in one complete sentence. Then answer: Can someone be a rescuer even if they could not save everyone — even the people they loved most?

EXIT PROMPT

1. The most important thing I'm taking from this story is: ____
2. Can someone be a rescuer even if they could not save everyone? My answer is: ____
3. One thing this story makes me want to understand better is: ____ It is all right not to have this fully figured out. "I'm not sure yet" is an acceptable answer.

“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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