

PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES · STUDENT HANDOUT

THE WEISSMANDL RESCUES

The Bratislava Working Group stopped the deportation trains for almost two years using bribery, forgery, and nerve. The 90-second portrait of Rabbi Weissmandl, its chief strategist — and of the family he could not save, but did not abandon.

GRADES 9–10

STEP 1 OF 4 · BEFORE VIEWING

Before we begin

Two things to hold before viewing. **The rescue is documented.** Beginning in 1942, the Bratislava Working Group — led by Gisi Fleischmann, with Weissmandl as its chief strategist — bribed an SS officer with tens of thousands of dollars and forged letters from a Swiss official who did not exist — a name recorded in Abraham Fuchs's account as "Ferdinand Roth." For nearly two years, the deportation trains from Slovakia stopped. **The cause is contested.** Historians agree the trains stopped, but they disagree over whether the bribery is what stopped them. This lesson is about holding those two facts — a documented outcome and a disputed cause — at the same time.



*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 (Slovak: *Pracovná skupina*). Gisi Fleischmann led it; Weissmandl was its chief strategist.

Deportation

The forced removal of people from their homes, loaded onto trains bound for Nazi concentration and death camps.

Transit Camp

A holding camp where prisoners were gathered before being shipped onward to a death camp. Seréd', in western Slovakia, is where Weissmandl was held after his arrest.

Slovak Ransom (local bribery)

The Working Group's *local* effort in 1942–43: it bribed the SS adviser in Bratislava and forged official-looking letters. This coincided with a pause in deportations — the trains from Slovakia stopped for nearly two years. That the trains stopped is documented; whether the bribe is why is disputed.

Europa Plan

A separate, *larger* 1943 proposal to ransom the Jews of all Nazi-occupied Europe for a very large sum. Unlike the local Slovak bribery, the Europa Plan mostly failed — the negotiations collapsed and the broad 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 scheme look official.

Rescuer ("upstander")

Someone who uses their own position or safety to protect a person in danger. Julius Natali, a Slovak Christian, hid Weissmandl until liberation. *A note on the word:* scholars caution that the "bystander vs. upstander" binary can flatten hard choices made under terror; many prefer *rescuer* or, for those honored by Yad Vashem, *Righteous Among the Nations*.

Anticipation

BEFORE YOU WATCH

For almost two years, the Bratislava Working Group prevented Nazi deportation trains from leaving Slovakia. The group bribed an SS officer and forged letters from an official who did not exist. Here is the part historians argue about: we know the trains stopped, but we do not know for certain that the bribe is *why*. What does it mean to give credit for an outcome when the cause is disputed? Write two or three sentences with your prediction before you watch.

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.

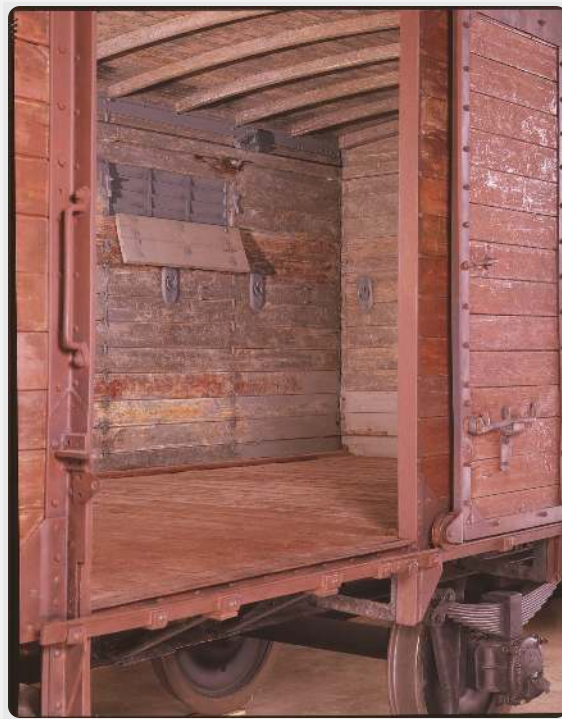
Watch: projectwitness.org/videos/microshort-ep6-weissmandl



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.

Text-Dependent Analysis & Historical Sourcing

1. The film says the deportation trains stopped for nearly two years, but it never says the bribe *caused* them to stop. Find the moment the narration states the outcome. Why might the filmmakers state what happened without claiming why?
2. The Working Group used bribery, forgery, and delay rather than weapons. How does the film present resistance as intellect and nerve? Point to one image — the envelope of cash sliding toward an SS sleeve, the forged “Ferdinand Roth” letter, or the wire hidden in a loaf of bread.
3. When the Nazis sealed Weissmandl and his own family in a cattle car, he sawed the lock open with a wire hidden in a loaf of bread, begged his wife and five children to jump, and jumped first to show them it was possible. They could not; he went alone. The film says he “could not save them” but “did not abandon them.” Explain the difference those two phrases ask you to hold — and why the film is careful never to say he left them.
4. Gisi Fleischmann led the Working Group; Weissmandl was its chief strategist. How does the film share the credit between them, and why does that matter?
5. SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny was responsible for tens of thousands of deportations. The film shows him only as a sleeve or a gloved hand — never a face, never a partner. Why do you think the filmmakers made that choice?
6. The film does not tell us how many people hid in the Bratislava bunker with Weissmandl, because the sources disagree. Why might careful filmmakers leave a disputed number out entirely?

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.

Argumentative Paragraph • MEAL Format

The Working Group bribed SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny — a man directly responsible for tens of thousands of deportations — to try to buy time. Write one well-developed argumentative paragraph (150–200 words) using the MEAL structure (**M**ain claim, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, **L**ink) that answers the following:

PROMPT

Was it right to negotiate with, and pay, a mass murderer if doing so might save lives? Make a claim and support it with evidence from the film and historical context. Hold the discipline: the deportation trains stopped, but historians dispute whether the bribe is why.

Underline your main claim sentence. Circle your evidence.

MEAL GRAPHIC ORGANIZER · PLAN YOUR PARAGRAPH

Draft a phrase in each cell before you write the full paragraph.

M — Main claim	My arguable answer to the prompt:
E — Evidence	Specific proof from the film / record:
A — Analysis	How that evidence supports my claim:
L — Link	Sentence tying back to the claim:

How your work will be looked at

SINGLE-POINT RUBRIC · YOUR MEAL PARAGRAPH

CRITERIA	EVIDENCE OF MEETING THE STANDARD	AREA TO GROW
Main claim	One clear, arguable claim that answers the prompt (was it right to bribe the SS?) — not a summary.	
Evidence (specific)	Uses specific evidence from the film and the record — the forged “Ferdinand Roth” letter, the bribe, the documented two-year pause.	
Analysis	Explains <i>how</i> the evidence supports the claim, rather than leaving it to speak for itself.	
MEAL structure	Moves Main → Evidence → Analysis → Link; the closing sentence ties back to the claim.	
Historical accuracy	Holds the discipline: states the documented outcome without asserting the contested cause; names/spellings correct.	

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.

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:

- **Documented outcome** — the deportation trains stopped for about two years
- **Contested cause** — whether the bribery is *why* they stopped
- **Gisi Fleischmann** — led the Working Group
- **Chief strategist** — Weissmandl's role in the group

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.)

Sentence Frame Reflection

Complete the following sentence frame. You may write as many sentences as you need — the frame is a starting point, not a limit. Be specific.

“This story complicated my understanding of rescue because _____. I used to think a rescuer was someone who _____. Now I realize it can also mean _____. One question I am still sitting with is _____. It is all right not to have this fully figured out. ‘I’m not sure yet’ is an acceptable answer.”

Share your reflection with a partner. Where do your reflections overlap? Where do they diverge?

“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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