

## BEHIND THE WIRE

### CAST

KRISTEN - Mother to Greta and Maria  
FRIEDRICH - Husband to Kristen. Father of Greta and Maria.  
GRETA - youngest daughter  
MARIA - oldest daughter  
MARGOT - a Jewish girl  
KLARA - friend of Kristen  
MARTHA - friend of Kristen

The casting is suitable for exam purposes with Greta doubling with Klara and Maria doubling with Martha. The roles of Klara and Martha are not sufficiently long for exam purposes.

For a smaller number of players, it is possible for Kristen to double with Margot. The cast numbers are thus 3F and 1M, or 4F, 1M.

The running time is about 30 minutes.

Since this play is about a labour camp, it might be useful to set the scene by showing some archive pictures. The most suitable would be those that show people behind a wire fence.

If doing this play for A level, you could create some ensemble scenes at the beginning [and elsewhere], using the whole cast. For suggestions, see the Notes accompanying this play.

### **1st excerpt from the play**

#### SCENE 1

*The family home of Friedrich, who is in command of a concentration camp. Kristen is sitting at a table writing letters. Another part of the stage, possibly a little raised up on a platform, represents Friedrich's office. He is writing diligently throughout this first sequence. It is quiet. After a few moments, Greta runs in, obviously excited.*

**GRETA** Mummy, I've seen some children. Lots of children. And there's this girl with dark hair, who ...

**KRISTEN** Hush, Greta. Your father is in the study and you mustn't disturb him. You know how important his work is.

**GRETA** But I like her, Mummy. She's my friend.

**KRISTEN** *absently* That's lovely, darling. Run outside and play, there's a good girl.

**GRETA** I'm going to find my new friend and ask her to play on my swing.

*She runs out as Maria enters.*

**MARIA** Greta, be careful! You nearly knocked me over!

**GRETA** *from off-stage* Sorry!

**MARIA** That girl is quite wild, Mother. She runs round the compound like a little savage and everyone just smiles and lets her do exactly as she wants!

**KRISTEN** She is full of imagination and fun. Let her have her pleasure while she is still young, Maria. Youth does not last for long.

**MARIA** She is old enough to learn discipline, Mother. Father has been teaching me about discipline; he has told me how to be an asset to my family. He's teaching me

many things. [**Proudly.**] He says I would be a worthy son if ...

**KRISTEN** You are a worthy daughter, Maria. Never forget that.

**MARIA** But Father so wanted ...

**KRISTEN** A son, I know. But we do not always get what we want, Maria. You are his daughter and nothing can change that. Your father loves you and Greta, both of you, equally. He has no regrets and is proud of his daughters. [**Reaches out to embrace Maria.**] We both are.

*They freeze as the telephone rings on Friedrich's desk and he answers it.*

**FRIEDRICH** Commandant speaking. Yes ... Quite convenient. I will take the call. [**He appears to tidy himself up and sits up straight.**] Herr Führer. This is a great honour. I .. Of course ... That is so. ... Of course, Herr Führer. It shall be done. [**He replaces the telephone, frowning. After a few seconds, he picks up the phone again.**] Hello. Get me 73271. [**A pause.**] Kurt. It is Friedrich. The Führer has called me and the meeting goes ahead in eighteen days. [**A pause.**] Yes, it is indeed. And Kurt, if Paul would like to accompany me, I would be delighted ... Please do. [**Smiles.**] Good afternoon, Paul. And how is my favourite nephew? [**Smiles.**] My only nephew. Yes. And how would you like to accompany me to the capital? [**Listens.**] There is every likelihood that you will meet Herr Hitler, who has done me the honour of making a personal call. Yes, it is indeed a great privilege. [**Listens.**] That is settled. You shall accompany me, Paul. I will make all the necessary arrangements with your father. Goodbye.

*He replaces the receiver, then stands and calls. As he does so, Maria leaves the stage. Kristen enters the study.*

excerpt 2. From a flashback.

*Klara and Martha run in laughing and Klara pins a flower into Kristen's hair.*

**KLARA** Who is it, Kristen? Who sent the flower? We're your best friends, Kristen, so it's clearly your duty to tell us.

**KRISTEN** No one. [**A pause while they wait expectantly.**] It's none of your business. I'm busy.

**MARTHA** Busy? [**Looks at Klara.**] She's too busy for us, Klara.

**KLARA** Oh dear. Funny, she doesn't look terribly busy. Do you think there's something she isn't telling us?

**MARTHA** There must be ...

**KRISTEN** Look! I know you two will never be satisfied until you know who sent me the flower. I'll tell you everything tomorrow - I promise on my life - but I don't have time now. I have to - to meet somebody.

**MARTHA to Klara** She has to meet somebody. [**To Kristen.**] It must be someone we know. We know everybody in this town.

**KRISTEN** He isn't from this town. His father works with my father and we met when their family came to dinner, if you must know. Now, if you two would just leave me to ...

**KLARA** Mm. Somebody we don't know. A friend of father's. Sounds interesting. And judging by her impatience it has to be somebody rather more than a family friend. Don't you agree?

*She and Martha exchange looks as Friedrich enters.*

**KLARA her voice lowered** And it looks like the important family friend just walked in.

### excerpt 3. Still from a flashback

***Kristen enters wearing a bridal veil as the time changes again. She stands alone in the centre of the stage and the wedding march begins to play. Friedrich joins her and so do Klara and Martha, wearing wreaths of flowers on their heads. They all pose for a photograph and there is a flash. The three girls remain frozen as Friedrich steps forward and addresses the audience as if they are wedding guests.***

**FRIEDRICH** And finally, I would like to thank all of you for joining us on this happy occasion, helping to make it so special for both of us. But before we begin the feast I have a further announcement to make. This is news which even my wife does not yet know. I have saved the surprise for our wedding day. I hope you will all share in our happiness at our good fortune. I have obtained a position in the government and Kristen and I will shortly be moving to Berlin so that I can take up the post. We leave in two weeks time. Herr Hitler has given me a junior position in his advisory team. It is a great honour.

***Kristin looks visibly shocked. Klara and Martha take the veil from Kristen and the flowers from their own hair and walk forward as Friedrich returns to Kristen and they engage in a mimed conversation which shows that he is trying to convince her they will be happy.***

**MARTHA** And that was it. As soon as the honeymoon was over they moved away - many miles - to Berlin. We were sad because we'd lost our friend and we were not sure that she wanted to leave behind everything which was important to her, and everyone she knew.

**KLARA** And when we went to see her ...

***The scene changes. Friedrich hangs back while Kristen comes forward and embraces her friends, who look around, clearly impressed by where she lives.***

**KLARA** Oh Kristen, it's such a lovely house!

**MARTHA** So big! And the ceilings are so high.

**KLARA** So many rooms!

**KRISTEN** *shyly* Well - we shall be needing another room very soon. A nursery.

### excerpt 4

#### SCENE 3

***Greta and Margot face each other with the wire between them. The barrier is imagined, but their hands are held out, almost touching.***

**GRETA** What is your name?

**MARGOT** Margot. [*Looking behind her.*] But we mustn't speak so loud. The guard will hear us.

**GRETA** I don't care about the guards. Father tells them what to do and they do it straightaway. Sometimes he shouts at them and they are frightened.

**MARGOT** Your father? It must be wonderful to be with your father every day. My father was taken away before we arrived here. All the men went in one direction and all the women stayed together. Father called out that he would come back to find us. I don't know where Father is now, but Mother says he'll keep his promise and that we will surely meet again before too long. What is your name?

**GRETA** Greta.

**MARGOT** You are free. You shouldn't come here. You'll get into trouble. And I'll be in trouble too.

**GRETA** No I won't. And you won't. I'll tell Father and he'll tell them to leave me alone. Everybody has to do as Father tells them.

**MARGOT** Then you're lucky, Greta.

EXTRACT from Production Notes for Behind the Wire by Jo Hardy

**PRODUCTION NOTES + TECHNICAL CUES, ETC.**

*N.B. These notes are suggestions only. You may find them helpful; or they may act as a springboard for your own ideas; or you can choose to ignore them entirely! They may, however, be helpful for the busy teacher who can only spend a small time with each group. In that case, these notes could be copied and given to the group themselves.*

**INTRODUCTION: THEMES, THE PLAY'S INTENTION.**

There are opportunities to bump up the holocaust detail throughout this play. That could be made more of and be in consequence the main intention. Or you could decide to emphasise the relationships: the jealousy between siblings, what happens to a child who feels cut out of parental warmth and love, how a 'monster' is created - which has relevance for any place and time. Both themes are important to the play, but however much emphasis you choose to give the details of the holocaust, the jealousy issue must be also built up.

**CHARACTERS**

**KRISTEN** - Mother to Greta and Maria is essentially a gentle soul. She fell in love with the correct and ambitious Friedrich. But Friedrich changes when he is taken up by Hitler. Kristen is left bewildered by these changes and isolated from her friends. She appears to dote, as does her husband, on Greta, but displays a fierce mother-love for Maria at the end. I feel that this character is all at sea and only the tragedy of what occurs to her little daughter shows her where her priorities lie. There should, therefore, be a marked contrast at the end of the play.

**FRIEDRICH** - Husband to Kristen. Father of Greta and Maria. Tempting to play this character as a out-and-out unsympathetic Nazi, but the writer has showed him in the days of his courtship. He is formal and correct, in the German upper-class manner at this time, but he is also diffident and should show some charm in these scenes. He is never weak, however. Even his gallantry to the girl-friends shows an ability to think and plan. He does not share his thoughts and plans with Kristen, effectively side-lining her. I am sure that he would argue that he is protecting her from what she need not know. This explains a lot about Kristen, who never voices an opinion even about the camp. As the play progresses, he becomes increasingly hard-line and unsympathetic. We should see in voice-tone and cold looks, his lack of feeling for Maria, which is of course contrasted by his indulgent attitude to his younger daughter. At the end he is broken by events. We do not know whether he kills himself or his 'monster' of a daughter. It would be up to you to decide.

**GRETA** - youngest daughter. She is a portrait of childish innocence, protected and adored by all. She doesn't question this and, like any small child, expects it from her family, including Maria. She fails to see anything other than love in her sister. Play this little girl as about six or seven, full of warmth and enthusiasm for life. She needs to endear herself to the audience to gain the full impact of the end.

**MARIA** - oldest daughter. I see Maria as always physically on the outside, observing and calculating. She watches her father, in particular, dying for a word of kindness, or even being noticed. Try to build in moments in the play where there are opportunities to show her, even when she's not speaking, watching, her eyes fixed on her father. Working with the actor who plays Friedrich, you need to build up together moments of irritation from him as he literally brushes her aside. There is a coldness about Maria which comes from a long-ago broken heart. She is a monster, but she has been made that

way by neglect. The coldness will show itself in a formal manner, an emphasis on duty, which is copied from her father. She is the hardest character to play, because I think there should be some sympathy for her, so that is why I am suggesting that moments of neglect are worked on - for instance, when the parents are fussing over Greta.

MARGOT - Jewish girl. A small but vital role. Margot is also very young, maybe a little older than Greta, say around 9 or 10. The smallness of the role might mean expanding it for exam purposes. I have indicated ways this could be done in the Production Notes. It is not an easy role to play. She must be more fearful at the start, but the scene with the bear and chocolate, she has allowed herself to become child-like again. She takes courage from Greta; in fact, they feed each other, so that both face death with quiet courage. Speak the lines about the death chamber without too much emotion. Emotion is best carried by the words themselves.

KLARA & MARTHA - friends of Kristen. The two girls are interchangeable if you're not careful. Work to establish the differences between them. Perhaps Martha is genuinely wistfully attracted to Friedrich, and consequently more sincere - and perhaps a little clinging in the hug! Klara could be chirpier and more overtly flirtatious, but in an insincere way. Klara appears to be the leader of the two: the more forth-coming and confident.

The casting is suitable for exam purposes with Greta doubling with Klara and Maria doubling with Martha. The roles of Klara and Martha are not sufficiently long for exam purposes.

For a smaller number of players, it is possible for Kristen to double with Margot. The cast numbers are thus 3F and 1M, or 4F, 1M.

## SETTING

A single setting is required. There is an upper level needed for Friedrich's office, to separate it from the main stage. On it are a desk and chair. This upper level could also be used for the end to show the bodies of the two girls [see notes.]. On the main part of the stage you will need a table with maybe three chairs. It would be good to have a screen at the back, or you might be able to cast pictures up on your cyclorama. Research pictures of concentration camps to show at the beginning.

Flashbacks could take place on a forestage/ apron, or just the front section of the stage, so that the furniture settings need not be removed.

## LIGHTS

Lights are mainly on the mainstage and upper level together - largely interior. The forestage, apron or front of stage needs to be lit separately and is usually exterior, as the camp both sides of the wire, or it is used for the brighter and happier flashbacks.

In addition, there should be:

- a spotlight on one side of the stage for Maria's face, spying.
- a spotlight on the centre front [forestage]
- a spot for one person, capable of widening for two people, on the front part of the upper level
- separate lighting on the office desk on the upper level

## LIGHTING CUES...