

Dreams of Her Father

Hans Hubermann is not only Liesel's foster father but also her teacher: both a literal instructor, as he teaches her to read, and a model of dignity and morality during a time in which these values no longer prevail. Hans's persistence in giving Liesel the education he never had leaves her with a practical skill as well as the knowledge of the power of words; through his example, meanwhile, she learns the importance of staying true to her own beliefs. Always the "promise-keeper," Hans's memory of his Jewish friend Erik Vandenburg keeps him impervious to the pressure of the Nazi Party and the prejudice that it endorses (420). Hans Hubermann may be "just a man," faced with an unsolvable dilemma between acting according to his values and ensuring the safety of his family, but his persistent, even reckless impulse to reach out to the needy and act according to his own ethical code is the real and admirable legacy that he leaves to his daughter and to us (402).

The differentiation between right and wrong is a value constantly under attack in Nazi Germany, and Liesel's unyielding morality in these confusing times can be credited, undoubtedly, to her father. Despite even his son's scorn, Hans continually disregards the Nazi-regulated standards of his time in favor of what he feels to be right: repainting a Jewish customer's vandalized door, handing bread to an old man in the death-camp procession of the Jews, hiding Max Vandenburg in his basement. Hans "was not well-educated or political, but if nothing else, he was a man who appreciated fairness. A Jew had once saved his life," and so when the time comes, he keeps the promise he made to Max's mother and puts his own life on the line for a man whom his country tells him he should hate (180). In this regard, Liesel is very much her foster father's daughter: when the next crowd of concentration-camp-bound Jews is

pushed through town, Liesel and Rudy throw bread to them from the trees, and when Liesel later spots Max in a similar procession, even soldiers cannot keep her from him.

Hans also deserves credit for encouraging Liesel's interest in books. Between nightly read-aloud sessions and impromptu spelling lessons on the basement wall, Liesel finally attains the academic level of her classmates, and she begins to see books as a respite from the pain of her past and the struggles of her everyday life. When she awakes from a nightmare, she and Hans turn to *The Grave-Digger's Handbook* for comfort, and the tension in the bomb shelter during air raids is relieved only when Liesel reads aloud to her neighbors. Max, meanwhile, literally finds the key to survival in a copy of *Mein Kampf*, and he articulates the anger he feels towards Hitler by writing his own stories. Liesel ultimately turns to writing as an outlet as well, and she understands that her ability to endure in the midst of such tragedy is in large part due to her connection to words and, thus, to her father. "Papa, you saved me," she cries as she finds Hans's body after the bombings. "You taught me to read" (539).

Hans Hubermann's lessons are as applicable today as they would have been then, his commitment to "helping the helpless" particularly relevant in the wake of the Haitian relief efforts and the genocide in Sudan (418). The role of literature as an instrument of healing, meanwhile, can be seen in the prevalence of book drives, like the one my NEHS chapter runs during the holidays for impoverished children, and in the sudden outpouring of support for my local library now that county budget cuts threaten to shut it down. The character of Hans serves also as a testimony to the influential role that foster parents can play in a child's life. Without her father's example, Liesel would likely be a different person altogether, one who had never seen the full extent of the injustice committed by her country's leaders and never developed the love of reading that helps her to make sense of her painful experiences. Both Liesel and the reader,

then, can walk away from the tragedies of *The Book Thief* with Hans Hubermann's lessons in mind: the importance of morality in the face of hate, and the unique ability of words to provide comfort and regeneration in a seemingly unendurable time.

Markus, Zusak. *The Book Thief*. New York: Albert A. Knopf, 2006. Print.