

## THE KINDNESS AND CRUELTY OF HUMANS IN MARKUS ZUSAK'S "*The Book Thief*"

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper proposes the real incidents based with author's imagination, which happen during the World War II. This also tells about the sufferings of the Jews under the control of Hitler.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Markus Zusak was born in Sydney, Australia. He grew up listening to his parents' stories of their childhoods in Vienna and Munich during World War II. One story his mother often told was about watching a group of Jews being marched down the street on their way to the concentration camp in Dachau. An old man was struggling to keep up with the rest of the group. When a boy ran up to the man and offered him a piece of bread, the man fell to his knees, crying and kissing the boy's ankles. Then German officers took the bread from the man and whipped the boy. This scene became the basis for "**The Book Thief**." In the book, it is the main character's foster father who offers the old man the bread and is whipped by the officer. Zusak has said the story symbolized for him everything that is beautiful and everything that is horrible about humanity.

### II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Book Thief* was based on the Holocaust, a war based on religion. All events, people and places were either exact replicas of the Holocaust and parts of it, or similar to such things that happened. The Holocaust is the main factor in the story of the book, and many things that changed the story were based on true happenings. Markus Zusak wrote this book based on witness accounts from his parents, not based on a present situation, current effect or modern day conflict.

The biggest part of this book is Liesel's interest in books, and one portion of the book is dedicated to a book burning hosted by the Nazis. Liesel attends this event, and has to be happy about the loss of Jewish books. Real Nazi book burning that happened during World War II. These books burning represented the power of the Nazis and censorship. The image to the left is of a Nazi book burning that took place in Berlin's Opera Square at Berlin, Germany. Taken on May 10, 1933, this picture clearly depicts the massive amount of people that turn up to support Hitler, and the towering pile of books that are being burned because of religious, cultural or political opinion that opposes those of the Nazis.

Liesel takes in many Nazi activities such as the Hitler Youth. The Hitler Youth was influenced by that of the Nazis in the 1920's group. The group primarily started for boys and later girls took part in it in 1930's. The Hitler youth was mandatory for children over the age of 10. When Liesel turns ten, she is admitted to the Hitler

Youth, and this starts chapter of the Book in which Liesel will start feeling anger towards the Nazis, yet she is surrounded by their propaganda, guards and rules in a German town.

The Book Thief author, Markus Zusak, was greatly influenced by his parents' experience with the Holocaust. His book is based on the information of his parents and that of the world and books. Even though many of the characters in this book are fictional, the origins of the towns, events and actions are historically accurate. Although *The Book Thief* wasn't written during the time of World War II, Zusak was still around people who had been there and witnessed it.

### **III. AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Markus Frank Zusak (born 23 June 1975) is an Australian Writer. His mother Lisa is originally from Germany and his father Helmut is from Austria. They emigrated to Australia in the late 1950s. He is best known for *The Book thief* and *The Messenger* (US title, I AM the Messenger), these two novels are mainly for young adults which have been International best sellers. He won the annual Margaret Edwards awards in 2014. *The Book Thief* was published in 2005 and has been translated more than 30 languages. Besides winning awards in Australia and overseas.

### **IV. OUTLINE OF THE NOVEL**

Death introduces himself as the narrator of the novel. He says for the first time he saw the book thief, was on a train. The next time he saw her when he came as a pilot who had crashed his plane. And the third time was after a bomb blast. He associates a colour with each sighting: white, red, and black, the colors of the Nazi flag. Death then begins the story. Liesel, her mother, and her brother Werner are travelling on a train to Munich when Werner suddenly dies. Liesel and her mother get off the train to bury the body, and Liesel steals a book from one of the gravediggers. She and her mother continue their journey to a town called Molching, where Liesel will be raised by foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann. At first Liesel doesn't like her foster parents, but Hans wins her over by teaching her to roll cigarettes for him.

Slowly, Liesel adjusts to her new life, though she is plagued by nightmares of her dead brother. She meets and befriends a neighbourhood boy named Rudy, who worships the American athlete Jesse Owens and constantly pesters Liesel to kiss him. When Hans discovers that Liesel doesn't know how to read, he begins teaching her the alphabet, and together they make their way through the book Liesel stole from the gravedigger. Meanwhile, the political situation in Molching and throughout Germany is becoming serious, with war escalating and food and work shortages at home. When the town holds a book-burning to celebrate Hitler's birthday, Liesel steals another book from the flames.

Liesel begins delivering laundry for Rosa. One of Rosa's customers is the mayor's wife, Ilsa Hermann. One day Liesel is invited into Ilsa Hermann's study, where she marvels at the walls of books. Frau Hermann allows her to read in the study. Meanwhile, in Stuttgart, a German Jew named Max hides in a closet with no food, light, or water. A friend brings him false identity papers and a map hidden in MKPF, Hitler's autobiography. Max leaves the closet and takes the train to the Hubermanns' house. Hans, we learn, served with Max's father in World War I. After Max's father died, Hans promised Max's mother he would always help her. When Max arrives in

Molching, Hans and Rosa hide him in the basement. As he recovers from his ordeal, he and Liesel become friends, and Max writes her a book on the painted-over pages of MKPF.

Frau Hermann tells Liesel she can't afford to send out the laundry anymore. Liesel is furious because her family is already struggling to survive and the Hermanns have so much. With Rudy's help, Liesel begins sneaking into the Hermanns' library and stealing books. For Christmas, Liesel builds Max a snowman in the basement. When Max gets sick and falls into a coma, Hans and Rosa worry about how they will dispose of the corpse if he dies. After months, Max recovers. Nazi soldiers arrive and inspect the basement to see if it is deep enough for a bomb shelter. Luckily, they don't see Max. Liesel continues stealing books from the Hermanns' library. Frau Hermann leaves her a dictionary and thesaurus with a note saying she knows Liesel has been stealing from her. At a Hitler Youth carnival, Rudy wins three races. The Allies begin bomb blast near Molching, and the people on Liesel's block must take shelter in a neighbor's basement. With each raid, Liesel reads to them until it's safe to exit. Max, meanwhile, has to stay in the Hubermanns' basement by himself.

As the war intensifies, Nazi soldiers begin parading Jewish prisoners through town on their way to the concentration camp at Dachau. When Hans sees an old man struggling to keep up with the group, he gives him a piece of bread. Nazi soldiers intervene and whip both the man and Hans. Hans realizes he has aroused suspicion and drawn attention to himself, and Max is no longer safe in the basement. That night, Max leaves Hans and Rosa's house. Hans waits for soldiers to come take him away, but he do nothing. Instead, they come to Rudy's house, to recruit him for a school for future Nazi leaders. Rudy's father, Alex, refuses to let his son go. The soldiers leave, but a few days later both Alex and Hans are drafted into the German army. After Alex and Hans leave for duty, Rudy and Liesel go to the next parade of Jews and scatter bread in the streets. Rosa gives Liesel a book that Max made for her called "*The Word Shaker*." It is the story of Max and Liesel's friendship, and promises they will be reunited some day.

Hans is sent to Essen, where he is part of a squad that cleans up after air raids. Another member of the squad takes a dislike to Hans, and one day he insists they change places on their work bus. The bus crashes and the other men are killed, while Hans merely breaks his leg. Hans gets sent home to recuperate. Following another air raid, Liesel and Rudy find an allied fighter pilot who has crashed his plane. They arrive just in time to see him die. Death sees Liesel for the second time when he comes to collect the pilot's soul. The Nazis continue to parade the Jews through Molching, and Liesel sees Max among the prisoners. Liesel tells Rudy about hiding Max. She had never told anyone before.

The mayor's wife gives Liesel a blank notebook so she can begins to write her own story. One night, while Liesel is in the basement and editing her book, her neighbourhood is bombed. Hans, Rosa, Rudy, and the rest of the neighbours are killed. While rescuing workers pull Liesel out of the rubble, she finds Rudy's corpse and gives him the kiss he always wanted. When the workers take her away, she leaves behind her finished book, called "*The Book Thief*". Death, who has been watching, rescues the book. Liesel goes to live with the mayor and his wife. After the liberation of the concentration camps, Max returns to Molching and finds Liesel. They hug and cry together. Liesel eventually grows up and moves to Australia, where she has a family and lives to an old age. When Death finally comes to take her soul, he shows her the book she wrote so many years before.

## **V. THE KINDNESS AND CRUELTY OF HUMANS**

The novel shows the varying degrees of people's kindness and cruelty, from the slight to the most extreme examples. Among the small acts of kindness we see Ilsa Hermann is inviting Liesel into her library and Rudy gives the teddy bear to the dying pilot represent the kind end of the spectrum. On the other hand, we see similar acts of cruelty, such as Viktor Chemmel's and Franz Deutcher's treatment of Rudy. We also see far more dramatic examples of each. The Hubermanns commit a great act of kindness in hiding and caring for Max. They keep him alive at great risk to themselves and always treat him with the utmost respect. Notably, they care for him not only physically by providing food and shelter but also emotionally, making him feels like a part of the family. Liesel is in particular kind to Max, and the two develop a strong bond. Given the political context of the time, with hatred and violence against Jews being rampant, Max clearly finds Liesel's kindness to be extraordinary. Meanwhile, the concentration camps linger unseen in the background of the book as the most extreme example of cruelty.

One scene in particular juxtaposes the two extremes of human behavior. In it, Hans Hubermann tries to help one of the Jews being marched through town on the way to Dachau. One particular Jewish man is weak and clearly suffering from hunger and exhaustion, and Hans impulsively rushes to him and gives him a piece of bread. It's a small act, but it shows great kindness. It lets the Jewish man knows that not only Hans not hate him for being Jewish, but he also pities him and wants to ease his suffering. Immediately after, one of the Nazi soldiers mercilessly whips Hans and the Jewish man. The act is cruel to begin with, but its cruelty is heightened by the fact that it comes in response to Hans's kindness.

## **VI. SUMMATION**

THE KINDNESS AND CRUELTY in Markus Zusak's Novel "THE BOOK THIEF" clearly describes about what had happened during the World War II in Germany and the sufferings of the Jew race under the control of horrible Hitler.

## **REFERENCE**

- [1]. Spark notes editors. "Spark note on the Book Thief." Spark notes.com. Spark Notes LLC. 2013. Web. 8 Dec. 2016