

SYNOPSIS

This is the story of Liesel Meminger, a young German girl who is placed in foster care during the early years of World War II by a mother too ill to care for her any longer. On the train to Molching, a small German town where she and her brother are to stay for the duration of the war, Liesel's brother dies from tuberculosis. On this terrible day, Liesel discovers a copy of *The Gravedigger's Handbook*, the first of a series of books she will find or steal. "Death," the personification who narrates the book, will always think of Liesel as the book thief; curious about this lonely, intelligent child, he decides to tell her story.

Liesel is left on her own to adapt to her new life with the Hubermanns, a middle-aged couple with two grown children, one a card-carrying Nazi soldier. Rosa Hubermann, the foster mother, is a choleric, short-tempered woman with hidden reservoirs of sympathy. Hans Hubermann, in contrast, is a gentle house-painter who plays the accordion and wants only a life of harmony. It is Hans who makes Liesel feel at home and tends to her through the long months of nightmares in the wake of her abandonment.

These are tumultuous years, as Hitler's policies ravage the Jewish communities and bring privation and suffering to Europe. Even Death is appalled by the numbers of souls he must carry off. There are serious food shortages, book burnings, and the assignment of air raid shelters. Liesel goes to school, making fast friends with Rudy Steiner, her irrepressible neighbor and classmate, while Rosa Hubermann takes in laundry to supplement the family income. Work is scarce for Hans; he is not a member of the Nazi Party, having violated the Aryan code by painting over the hateful graffiti on the door of a Jewish shop. His lack of steady employment, however, gives Hans time to teach Liesel to read, and she slowly becomes a lover of words.

These are hungry years, as Rosa loses many of her customers and feeds the family on watery soup and bread. Rudy and Liesel join a local gang to steal food. Liesel, though, would rather steal books, and finds in the unprotected library of the mayor's home a treasure trove of volumes. An odd, secretive relationship develops between the grieving wife of the mayor and the book thief. Life takes on a pattern of surface conformity and covert acts of petty crime and resistance. Rudy and Liesel despise Nazi brutality, but join the Hitler youth groups that have sprung up all over Germany.

When a young Jewish refugee comes to hide out in the basement of the Hubermanns' home, the inhumanity of Nazism takes on a human face. Max Vandenburg is the son of a man who saved Hans Hubermann's life during the first World War. Hans

owes his dead friend the act of compassion that could easily jeopardize the lives of everyone in his household.

During his months in the basement, Max becomes part of the family and forges a strong bond with Liesel. But when another act of compassion on the part of Hans makes Max's continued residence with the Hubermanns too risky, the young Jewish man must flee. Liesel encounters him later in the war, when he has become a prisoner at Dachau concentration camp. Yet, Death will not come to carry Max's soul away yet. It is the Hubermanns who will die in an air strike that decimates the neighborhood and leaves Liesel alone again. In the midst of her loss and despair, the mayor's wife comes to claim her and give her another home.

In 1945, the war has ended. Liesel is helping out in Alex Steiner's tailor shop when Max Vandenburg reappears, having miraculously survived Dachau. The story jumps forward in time, and Liesel is now an old woman living in Sydney, Australia. Death has read her story and gently comes to claim her soul. He will not soon forget the touching history of the book thief, one of the good Germans who steadfastly kept her humanity and her courage during one of the most terrible eras of modern history.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Seeds of World War II

During the 1930s Germany, soundly defeated in World War I, gathered strength under the leadership of the fanatical nationalist Adolf Hitler. Hitler and his Nazi Party rearmed Germany, breaking the Versailles Treaty of 1919 that had been designed to keep peace throughout Europe. Hitler's trained thugs murdered political opponents, clearing his way to power. The Nazi leader entered into a series of negotiations that would allow Germany to dominate eastern Europe. Envisioning themselves as a superior or "master" race, the Nazis ultimately planned to rule northern Europe as well.

Hitler carefully laid his political groundwork. The 1934 non-aggression pact he signed with Poland was a ploy to keep the Poles from arming against Germany. Hitler then signed an agreement with Stalin, Russia's leader, dividing Poland between them. In 1936, the Italian leader Mussolini also signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. In 1938, the Nazi-run government incorporated Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia into an empire known as "the Third Reich."

The stage was set for another world war. When France and Great Britain failed to act quickly to stop Hitler, the Germans opened hostilities, launching a massive air offensive on Warsaw and the surrounding area. The Nazis gained control of Poland within three weeks. With Poland as its base, the German army launched its campaign across Europe, leaving destruction and death in its wake.

Hitler and the Jews

In 1933, when Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, a national census showed that the Jewish population of Germany numbered around 600,000, representing less than one percent of the country's total population. Of these, approximately eighty percent held German citizenship. The remaining twenty percent were mainly Jews of Polish descent. Why did this ethnic group pose such a serious threat to Hitler's ideal Germany? The answer lies in the long history of anti-Semitism, particularly in Europe. Jews were persecuted in Spain and in Russia, where they were coerced to convert to Christianity or face dire consequences. In general, the Jews tended to retain their own

religious and cultural beliefs, although some did convert in order to conform to social expectations. In addition to the religious issue, Jews sometimes acted as money-lenders and were then scapegoated for the economic problems of the citizenry.

Hitler was not Germany's first rabid anti-Semite. He was greatly influenced by Karl Lueger, mayor of Vienna, Austria from 1897 to 1910. The leader of the Christian Social Party, Lueger garnered voters with his platform of religious and racial homogeneity. He drew his support largely from the lower middle class, exploiting prejudices and attributing financial hardships to the practices of the Jews.

Hitler found it politically expedient to take the same approach. In *Mein Kampf*, he accused Jews of deliberately attempting to pollute the pure German gene pool, of robbing Aryans, and of destroying the nation's social fabric. His propaganda became effective during the Great Depression, when the economic collapse put many out of work. Hitler's government introduced a strict program of segregation of the Jews, prohibiting them from attending mainstream schools and from doing business with Aryans, or "pure" Germans. The government smiled on thugs who destroyed Jewish property and terrorized Jewish communities.

With the passing of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, German Jews lost their rights as citizens, and intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews was prohibited. As acts of violence and outrage against Jews increased, many fled Germany. Those who remained behind suffered greatly from lack of food and medicines. Organized death squads killed thousands in Germany and Eastern Europe. In 1938, the assassination of a German diplomat by a Jewish teenager touched off a Nazi retaliation of astonishing brutality—*Kristallnacht*, or "night of broken glass," when Nazis and SS storm troopers smashed the windows in Jewish stores, committing murder and acts of violence along the way. There were also mass arrests that resulted in the expropriation of Jewish monies and properties by government officials.

In 1942, the Nazis instituted the concentration camps, where prisoners were worked to death, shot, or gassed. The vast majority of German and Polish Jews ended up in these camps; relatively few survived Hitler's Final Solution. The Allies liberated the camps in 1945, with the defeat of the Axis Powers. Hitler would not live to face trial for the genocide he had orchestrated. He committed suicide in April, 1945, when the Red Army invaded Germany.

Jesse Owens

James Cleveland Owens was born in Lawrence County, Alabama in 1913 and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. Owens, the grandson of a slave, was often sick as a child. He was given the name *Jesse* by a teacher in Cleveland who did not understand his country accent.

Jesse grew up in poverty, taking odd jobs delivering groceries, loading freight cars, and working in a shoe repair shop as a young teenager. During this time, he realized that he had a passion for running, encouraged by his junior-high track coach.

Owens first came to national attention when he was a high school student and equaled the record of 9.4 seconds in the 100-yard dash and long-jumped 24 feet 9½ inches at the 1933 National High School Championship of Chicago.

Owens attended Ohio State University where he won a record of eight individual NCAA championships. Although Owens enjoyed athletic success, he had to live off-campus with other African-American athletes. When he traveled with the team, he had to eat at “black-only” restaurants, and sleep in “black-only” hotels.

In 1936 Owens was selected to compete for the United States in the Summer Olympics in Berlin. Adolf Hitler was using the games to show the world a resurgent Nazi Germany and the superiority of the Aryan race. Owens, however, won four gold medals. Hitler publicly snubbed Owens, shaking hands only with German victors.

When Owens returned to the United States, he was given a hero’s welcome, but it was short-lived. As an African-American before the Civil Rights movement in America, Owens suffered the injustices of his race and eventually filed for bankruptcy. It wasn’t until 1966 that his rehabilitation began and he lived out the rest of his life as a U.S. goodwill ambassador. Owens died of lung cancer at the age of 66.