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Finding Strength in Literature; The Harrowing Story of Dita Kraus

Literature has impacted the masses throughout the ages, often becoming a safeplace for those who are distraught or in need of escape. The period of the Holocaust was no different. One little Jewish girl found herself confronted with evil, but used her love of reading as a shield. Dita Kraus is a Holocaust survivor and former Auschwitz prisoner. Dita was twelve when her family was ripped from their home in Prague and dropped into the Terezin concentration camp. From this point on, she was met with the brutalities of Nazism, personal loss, and emptiness of spirit. Through Dita's fight for survival she kept the light of literature aflame, while simultaneously inspiring thousands of children to strive for hope. Dita will forever represent the youthfulness that was stolen from millions of Jews through her fierce defense of a mere eight books hidden from the Nazis. In Antonio Iturbe's biography, "The Librarian of Auschwitz," Dita's transition from girl to hero demonstrates the power of literature and what it represented to so many who had been stripped of so much. Those eight books symbolized more than the words contained within them, they were defiance in the face of adversity, they were hope.

Growing up, Dita was a normal, adventurous school girl. She frequently asked questions, often becoming victim to skeptical glares. Her family's initial transfer was also filled with questions, as she did not understand the magnitude of her situation. In 1943, after two years of hard labor, Dita and her family were moved to Auschwitz, an extermination camp. Luckily, Dita was placed in the family block, arguably the safest place to be. She was among other children and their families, and it proved to be a chance for Dita to meet the legendary Jewish leader, Fredy Hirsch. Energetic and charismatic as ever, Fredy was an Olympic hopeful in his youth, and now, he led Block 31 where Dita lived. He secretly educated hundreds of children through songs

and stories but his greatest secret was the stash of books he kept hidden in his desk. He cared for eight of them; geometry, Russian grammar, world history, therapy, an atlas, "The Adventures of the Good Soldier," a Russian text, and a Czech book. The magnitude of these books was immeasurable, leading Fredy to seek out a librarian. Fierce little Dita came to mind. Her dedication to schoolwork and helpfulness made her the perfect guardian angel. Her new job included running around camp to deliver books to teachers, repairing the bindings of overused books, and smoothing out aging pages. Dita even sacrificed her own rations so she could afford to sew coat pockets that could hold books. Dita's plight to rescue Fredy's books was extremely risky, but her young spirit and determination helped her preserve those wilting pages for all the struggling children.

Caring for books also helped distract Dita from the horrors around her. She would often get lost in a book when times were tough, as the novel described, "She crossed oceans and mountains, navigating with her finger along the rivers" (Iturbe 26). When not reading, Dita took care of her family. Dita's father, Dr. Hans Polach, was a law professor who became a history teacher for the children, often garnering interest with his fantastical stories of knights and dragons. As time went on, Dita's father became sick. He was stuck in the men's barracks without a way to contact his family. One day however, a man who slept close to Dita's father sought out Dita and her mother for an unfortunate conversation, "'My husband? Is he worse?' asks Liesel, her voice breaking. 'He's dead.' How can you sum up a life in just two very short words?" (Iturbe 181). Dita recalls her childhood being swept away with just two powerful words. Six months later, her mother became sick as well. Even on her deathbed, Liesel stayed calm and collected for Dita. Suddenly, when all hope seemed lost, the war ended and the Allies stormed

the camp, arresting the Nazis and providing medical assistance to the Jews. Liesel passed away, and Dita was now an orphan. Her spirit was hardened, but she persevered. Being the librarian had offered her a distraction and purpose at a time when her survival depended on it the most.

Dita's life after 1945 was finally a time to reflect and move on. Shortly after the war, Dita ran into Otto Kraus, an instructor in the family block. The two bonded over the horrors they shared and later married. They were an unstoppable team, with Otto writing books and Dita selling them. Otto's most famous Holocaust book, "The Painted Wall," was published in 1994 with the help of Dita. Together, they lived in Israel publishing books and conducting interviews to educate the public on the horrors of the Holocaust. They raised three children and both became English teachers at the Hadassim school for European Jewish Refugee children (Wojakovski 1). Sadly, Otto passed in 2000, leaving Dita to care for their books in Israel. She continues to accept youth into her house and educate them about the Holocaust. She also emphasizes to all who will listen, about the importance and the power of literature.

Reliving the horrors of Dita's childhood has helped me discover the power of books, but more so, the power of hope. As a bookworm myself, I find happiness in literature. Just like Dita, I understand the power of books, and the ways in which they can change a person. Unlike Dita however, I am not forced to hide my books in secret coat pockets, or stuff them beneath floorboards. The Nazis hated books because so long as they existed, people could create, rebel, dream and worst of all, hope. Dita's intrinsic love of reading had to be kept a secret, while mine is something I voice. Due to my dedication to literature, I voice my opinions about books at my school's book club, where I am president. I also actively encourage others, especially those younger than me about the importance of reading. Had I been in Dita's situation, my

outspokenness about literature would have been deadly. It is surreal to imagine that possessing a book could have resulted in death and precisely the reason we can never forget such horrors. In terrible situations of the past, the sacrifices of real people like Dita provide a timeless sense of hope.

The story of Dita Kraus is as harrowing as the characters she read about. Whether transporting books in secret, sneaking pencils to children, or spending days hidden away to read, Dita was an imaginative little girl forced into a horrendous situation. While the other children were broken by the horrors of the Holocaust, Dita became their guardian angel in disguise. Her mission to protect the children transformed her into a storyteller, a teacher, and a mature young woman. Taking care of those eight books was an act of selflessness that allowed others to find happiness in an era of fear. By learning about Dita and her bravery during hardship, I see her as the hero of her own story, helping us to remember the past and preserve the memories of millions of lives lost in the Holocaust.

Works Cited

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