

Growing up, I knew two things about my great-grandfather: He was very tall, and he was a member of Hitler's cabinet.

Once I learned about World War II and the Holocaust at school, I was horrified at my great-grandfather's position in the Nazi government. I couldn't help wondering what he knew or didn't know, what he did or didn't do, to further Hitler's barbaric ambitions.

My family told me that my great-grandfather, Hans Ernst Posse, was the German Secretary of Economy from 1928 to 1945. Other than that, they said nothing. Although I tried to get more information, I met a wall of silence as impenetrable as the Berlin Wall. It wasn't that they were hiding information, but they didn't know exactly what role Hans Posse played in Hitler's atrocities, and they were way too terrified to find out the truth. And there was no public information about Hans Ernst Posse that could give me clues.

I began this novel because I felt compelled to understand who my great-grandfather was. Oskar and Edith Eberhardt—my main characters—allowed me to explore some of the questions I had about my great-grandparents, the life they lived, and the choices they made. Then, in 2012, I got some real life answers.

I was in Hamburg visiting my aunt when I stumbled across an old file of newspaper clippings and letters, a file that my aunt later admitted she knew nothing about. The letters were dated 1947 and were addressed to the "Tribunal for De-Nazification." This ad hoc Allied judicial committee was established after the war to determine whether lesser Nazi officials like my great-grandfather should be prosecuted for war crimes.

The letters in this file—correspondence handwritten or typed on thick, yellowing paper, with traces of mold and mildew accumulated over 65 years—told me that Hans Ernst Posse was a decent, honest man. They told me that he tried, whenever possible, to help Jewish friends and colleagues persecuted by the Nazis. One letter writer, Leopold Trier, said that my great-grandfather urged him to leave the country "as quickly as possible," because he feared that things would get "very dark" for Jews in Germany. Mr. Trier wrote that Hans Posse "apologised for having to face me as a tool of the Nazis," and said that he was staying in the government to help people "in distress" and to make sure that "the regulations against Jews [be] applied in a very lenient way."

Since discovering Mr. Trier's letter three years ago, I have practically memorized its contents. Sometimes I take it out just to touch it, to feel the heavy paper, to run my fingers over the typewriter ribbon-smudged letters. Each time I hold it, part of me is transported back to the time when it was written, and I wonder what my great-grandfather was thinking, stuck in a prison during a cold north German winter, held to answer for the crimes of an administration that he wanted absolutely no part of. I want to reach out and reassure him that I know now what he tried to do, that it was noble and sincere, if ultimately woefully insufficient to withstand the unfathomable machinery of hatred that was being set into motion. I want to tell him that what he did for Leopold Trier and others shone a tiny beacon of light in a vast cave of darkness.

I want to tell him I am proud to be his great-granddaughter.

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