

Luther's Parents

Martin Luther was the son of Hans Luther (c1459-1530) and Margarethe Lindemann (1463-1531). The surname of Luther was sometimes spelled Luder, which was sometimes the case for Hans but not for his son Martin where the modern spelling had become fixed. Like all of us, Martin Luther had a mother and a father, although Catholic critics claimed his father was actually one of the male demons known as an incubus. That, of course, was just a nasty slander. Like most parents, Hans and Margarethe had a huge influence on how their son developed into an adult.

Luther was a prodigious writer. The German edition of his works numbers over 200 volumes while the American edition in English translation is a selection of his works and is still over 100 volumes. These works are peppered with autobiographical comments by Luther. About his birth, in one case, he stated:

"I was born in Eisleben and baptized in St. Peter's there.

I do not remember this, but I believe my parents and fellow countrymen."

All of us could pretty much the same thing about ourselves, only changing the town and the church names. On another occasion, he gives a concise autobiographical account of his life:

"I am the son of a peasant and the grandson and the great-grandson.

My father wanted to make me a burgomaster. He went to Manfeld and became a miner. I became a baccalaureate and a master. Then I became a monk and put off the brown beret. My father didn't like it, and then I got into the pope's hair and married an apostate nun.

Who could have read that in the stars?"

Describing himself as a peasant's son is somewhat inaccurate. Hans Luther was born a peasant in Mohra although farmer would be a better choice of words than peasant. The Luthers were not

serfs, rather they were well-to-do farmers. Hans' problem was that he was not destined to inherit the family farm. Mohra was in the region of Germany known as Thuringia. The inheritance practice there was that the youngest son inherited and the other boys had to go off and make their own fortune. So Hans went into mining copper and silver. That was a booming growth industry in late fifteenth-century Germany.

For us, Hans Luther being a miner conjures up images of *A Coalminer's Daughter* with dangerous toil and a meagre standard of living. Late medieval mining was not industrialized mining with huge work crews. It was more an artisanal small business venture. Furthermore, mining for silver and copper was far more profitable than mining coal. Hans was not simply someone who swung a pick-axe, he bought shares in the business. And he was successful. Hans Luther was prosperous and successful. He and his family would have been very upper middle class in the society of Germany at that time. One indication of the family's prosperity was that Luther was provided with a very fine education in the Latin grammar schools of Eisleben, Mansfeld, and Eisenach. These schools gave him the solid foundations for earning university degrees. A family had to have money to pay for that sort of education. The young Martin exhibited great intelligence and wit. Hans and other members of the family marked him out for a career as a lawyer/magistrate. The plan was for Luther to get his BA and MA and from there become a Doctor of Civil Law. That credential would open up all sorts of opportunities as a magistrate, judge, or government official. When Luther had completed his BA and MA from Erfurt and was preparing to begin his doctorate in Civil Law, Hans bought him a copy of the great legal textbook *Corpus Juris Civilis*. This graduation gift was a very expensive multi-volume set of books. It would be the equivalent of a modern parent buying their child a very expensive laptop or tablet computer for college. Luther giving away his *Corpus* to a classmate when he entered the Augustinian order was a source of great aggravation to Hans.

Margarethe Luther came from the well-to-do Lindemann family of Eisenach. The Lindemann's were part of the small social elite of Eisenach. They were more educated, more wealthy, and better connected than the Luther family. The fact is, Hans Luther married up the social ladder. It is highly probable that the Lindemann's aided Hans Luther's quest to become a partner in the mining business. His hard work and talent made it a good investment. During his teenage years in the Latin grammar school of Eisenach, Luther lived with his Lindemann relatives. They clearly supported the plan for Luther to become a successful and rich magistrate.

Luther had a normal childhood and a religious childhood as well which would have been largely due to his mother Margarethe. She was at home running the Luther house while Hans labored in the mines. Luther remembered his parents fondly and lovingly. He was a great believer in honoring one's father and mother. In turn, they respected their son and accepted his teachings as true doctrine. Both died in the same faith as their son.

Margarethe Luther was universally regarded as a pleasant Christian woman by those who knew her. She was a good mother to her children. That is not to say that she and the young Martin Luther had a conflict free relationship. One of the few memories of his childhood that Luther spoke about was a beating that Margarethe gave him for stealing a nut. Apparently she hit him hard enough to draw blood. In this case, Luther used his experience to urge parents and teachers to be more restrained in using corporal punishment on children. Overall, Luther had a loving and respectful relationship with his mother. As a testimony to that fact, Luther and his wife Katherina von Bora also had a loving marriage of partnership and mutual respect.

So Luther was not born poor or loveless. He had a normal childhood, had loving parents who wanted the best in life for him, and received an excellent education. Otherwise, he was not particularly unique. Lots of German families were as prosperous as the Luthers. Many children attended good schools that would prepare them for university. Most of those children had

parents who raised them well. What made Luther special is that he went on to start the Reformation whose consequences have endured and evolved over the past five hundred years.

Further Reading: Ian Siggins, *Luther and History Mother* (Fortress, 1981).

For a brief look at Katherina von Bora, Luther's wife, see:

http://www.corndancer.com/fritze/reformation/refmaton_arch/refmaton_katie.html

For a biography of Katherina von Bora, see: Rudolf K. Markwald and Marilyn Morris Markwald, *Katherina von Bora: A Reformation Life* (Concordia, 2002).