

Ilse Johansen, *Surviving the Gulag* (University of Alberta Press, 2017)

At the beginning of WWII, Romania fought alongside Germany against the Allied forces. However, in August 1944, following a coup d'état, Romania changed sides. It is during this messy transition that Ilse Johansen's story begins.

Ilse was a German woman, born to a Danish father and a German Latvian mother. She enjoyed a privileged childhood, was well-educated and was taught German, Russian and Latvian. During her time in the prison camps, she would also learn some Romanian.

In August 1944, Ilse was working in a hospital in Bucharest when the city was invaded by the Soviet army. German soldiers were forced to surrender. Though Ilse was not herself in the German army, she wore the uniform of the Nazi party during her civilian duties (xxi), and was forced to surrender along with them. However, as she was able to speak three distinctly different European languages, she was valuable to the Soviets as a translator. It is undoubtedly this skill that helped keep her alive in the prison camps for five years, despite multiple escape attempts.

Though it is toned down in her memoir, likely because it was written post-WWII when the atrocities committed by the Nazis had become well-known, it is clear that Ilse was a Nazi herself, or that she at least supported the Nazi party. In the introduction to the memoir, written by Heather Marshall (a relation of Ilse's), we are told that while there is no evidence that Ilse was a member of the Nazi party, 'it is probably safe to conclude that she was' (xxi).

However, the holocaust is not the focus of this memoir. It is not even mentioned in passing, because this is not a story about Germany or the holocaust: this a story about a resourceful, strong and determined German woman who somehow survived five years living in Russian prison camps.

Ilse's memoir, translated from the original German, is chaotic. The writing is abrupt, which creates a sense of urgency in the reader, as though what you are reading is not a re-telling, but is something that is happening right now. There is also little emotion in Ilse's writing. While Ilse does seem to be moved by the tragedies she is forced to witness, and is compassionate towards others, she comes across as reserved and mostly observant; unwilling to get too involved in the happenings in the camps if they do not concern her.

At first, this detached style can keep the reader at arm's length. We are never fully invited into Ilse's heart or mind, nor that of any of her fellow prisoners or friends. There is almost a void between reader and writer. However, this detachment can result in moments of poignancy when, after being kept away from the story, the reader is brought back when they are reminded that the pitiful characters Ilse describes were real people; people who are lost to history, nameless, and who may now only exist within the pages of Ilse's memoir.

Ilse knows that these dying men will be lost, that their comrades who have promised to pass on their 'last greetings' to their families will likely die and be lost themselves, and nobody will remember them. She tries to remember their names, but is unable to. She describes time she spent with a staff sergeant from Munich, his 'hands and face so swollen that his comrades have to feed him' (54). She washes him, and he shows her a photo of himself as a handsome young

Book reviews: *Surviving the Gulag* by Ilse Johansen. Lauren Dougherty.
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

man, standing with his wife and child. He is unrecognisable. She will not remember his name, but when she thinks of him later she will simply think 'surely he must have died' (54). It is likely that nobody will ever know who this man was, and his wife and child may have never known what became of him. Despite Ilse's emotionless retelling, moments like this, which are peppered throughout the memoir, are gut-wrenching.

However, there are moments of irritation. When one attempts to trace Ilse's journey on the map provided (which one may wish to do, as there is a lot of travelling), one may be hindered by the illogical placement of said map. Rather than being placed at the front of the book in an easy-to-locate position, the map is placed some 30 pages into the text, after the translator's preface, the acknowledgements, the editor's introduction and a secondary introduction (all essential reading) and before the memoir itself. The commonly occurring typos in the text also tend to distract the sharp-eyed reader and disrupt the story.

The truly amazing part of Ilse's story is that she survived. She survived starvation, hard labour, wearing thin summer clothing in -50C temperatures in Russia while cutting down trees and dragging them back to camp. She survived broken ribs without medical aid, bed bugs, lice, dysentery, numerous attempts at rape and regular beatings. Despite all she experienced, she was determined to live, and so she did. As Ilse herself said, 'it would be cowardly to surrender to one's fate helplessly' (107).

Lauren Dougherty