

Into the Flames

Irene Gut Opdyke

Critical Essay

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Irene Gut Opdykes's book Into the Flames is enthralling and inspirational. From the first page, she transports the reader to another place in time. Her story reads much like a fictional novel, complete with love and deep friendships as well as rape and murder. With her detailed descriptions and honest thoughts, she makes it difficult to remember that this is the story of someone's life and not the product of an overactive imagination.

There are two themes represented numerous times throughout the story. Trust and friendship play an important role in Irene's story of survival and were prevalent during World War II when people were trying to survive the Nazis. In addition to the themes of the novel, Opdyke compels the reader to truly understand the danger people, like her, faced every day in an attempt to save Jews from a certain death.

Trust is a very powerful thing and emerges as a major theme of the story. Over and over Irene is forced to put her faith into perfect strangers. She has to make quick decisions about people she barely knows at a time when she is surrounded by danger. However, trust is a two way street. The people she helped to hide during the war were also forced to trust her. Her decisions made the difference between life and death for her and the people who put their faith in her to keep them safe and alive.

In the beginning of the story, Irene is brought to a hospital in Russia after her group is attacked. She knows no one and is alone in a strange country where she doesn't even speak the language. At a time when she needs someone most, she puts her faith and trust into Dr. Olga who gives her a place to live, a job in the safer part of the hospital and, above all, friendship. She regards Dr. Olga as her confidant and is in desperate need of her support and protection. Though she did help Irene get back on her feet, Dr. Olga betrayed her by drugging her and using

her for her own sick perversions. Irene needed her help and instead, Dr. Olga exploited and used her.

Though the humiliation and betrayal she suffered at the hands of Dr. Olga angered and disappointed her, she used it to make better decisions in the future. She took what she learned from her bad decision and promised herself that she would not let anything like it happen again. She felt partially responsible for being so trusting. She said, "I had been kept by her as a toy, for her own amusement, just as a pet dog is kept to be played with. But it was partially my own fault for being so trusting. I would never be so naïve again." (Opdyke, 26)

In contrast to Dr. Olga, Irene was able to trust Meriam, Dr. David's friend. After a second incident at the hospital, Irene is in fear for her life and needs somewhere to hide. Dr. David arranges for Irene to travel to a Russian village to live with his friend, a woman Irene had never met. She is forced to trust two people to keep her hidden and alive. Meriam allows her to live with her as her "cousin" to escape the turmoil and betrayal she had faced at the Russian hospital. Without Meriam's help, Irene may have been captured by the Communists and jailed. She understood the risk that Meriam had taken to hide her. She said, "And I wept as I considered the danger Meriam had risked to protect me." (49)

The second theme that develops from Irene's story is that of friendship. While working for the major, she learns of the atrocities the Nazis are committing towards the Jewish people. She feels it is wrong and does what she can to help. Over and over she risks her life to help people she barely knows. In her story, she always refers to the people she is hiding as her friends. They were her second family and she spent the better part of her day deceiving the German military to keep her friends hidden.

By hiding her friends, she truly risked her life. She witnessed first hand what the SS would do to her if they caught her. The sight of a Polish family, who had been harboring Jews in their home, being hung was almost too much for her to take. She said, "I saw the same fate for me, if my actions were ever discovered."(139)

In addition to the themes of trust and friendship, Opdyke gives a first hand account of how selfless and brave a person can be. She helped other people survive a dangerous time in history simply because she believed it was wrong not to help them. Through her eyes, the reader experiences the terror she feels while lying to SS officers and hiding Jews in a house where certain death was only steps away if they were caught.

I constantly wonder what I would have done if I lived during a time when the Nazis were terrorizing innocent people and attempting to exterminate the Jewish population. Would I have been brave enough to step up and risk my life to save others? Would I have been courageous enough to lie to the enemy in order protect people I barely knew? Would I have made the right decisions in distinguishing between who could be trusted and who would deceive me?

These questions tormented me as I read this book, along with other stories of survival of the holocaust. This story, in particular, delved into my subconscious while I was sleeping to twist my dreams into devilish nightmares. Night after night, I was tormented with harrowing visions of intimidating Nazi soldiers, skeletal Jews, murderous escapades and a light haired Polish girl desperately trying to maintain her composure and sanity in a world gone mad. As I awoke, these chilling visions slowly dissipated as the night sky brightened into another new day. I would relax in my comfortable bed only to come to the horrific realization that what was a nightmare for me was reality for so many others.

Opdyke's life during World War II was filled with fear, heartache and tragedy.

Somehow, through it all, she put her own safety on hold to help others in need. She was able to rise above her own problems to recognize that what was happening to the Jews was not right and do her best to help them. Her selflessness, bravery and compassion should be an inspiration to us all of what one person can accomplish when their spirit and kindheartedness knows no bounds.