

Ilse Totzke

(August 4, 1913 - March 23, 1987)

This essay was written by Pink Triangle Legacies Project Founder Dr. Jake Newsome and is based on the important research by Dr. Laurie Marhoefer, Jutta Körner, and Dorothea Kueller. Thank you for your work in preserving queer history.

Ilse Totzke was born in Strasbourg (then Germany, now France). Both of her parents were involved in the arts. Her mother was an actress, and her father directed the choir of the local theater. When she was 19 years old, Ilse moved to the German city of Würzburg to study violin and piano. While there, she made several Jewish friends, and kept up the friendships even after the antisemitic Nazi regime came to power in January 1933.

Records do not indicate how Ilse defined her sexuality or gender identity. Photographs show that she dressed in a butch style and may have passed as a man. She wore men's clothing and kept her hair in a masculine style that had been popular among lesbians in the 1920s.

In 1939, a physical education instructor at the University of Würzburg denounced Ilse to the local Gestapo and said that she was a spy. The only alleged evidence that the instructor provided was that Ilse did not receive her mail at her home address and that she hung out with Jewish people. During the ensuing investigation, Ilse's landlord told the Gestapo that Ilse was a social outsider and man hater who did not "receive gentlemen visitors." The implication was that Ilse was a lesbian. At first, the two accusations—that Ilse was a spy and that she was a cross-dressing man hater—might seem unrelated. But a widespread transphobic and homophobic stereotype of the time asserted that people who "cross dressed" or "hid" their sexual identity were accustomed to living and navigating life "in disguise." This supposedly meant that gender-nonconforming people, especially trans people, were more likely to be deceitful and good at avoiding detection, which were perfect qualities for a spy.

In May 1941, Ilse was denounced to the Würzburg Gestapo again. This time it was a neighbor who said she had seen Ilse in an "intimate friendship" with another woman. The neighbor claimed that -- to make matters worse -- the other woman was underage (which she was not) and was Jewish (which was also untrue).



Photo of Ilse Totzke taken by the Gestapo, 1943.
Staatsarchiv Würzburg

The Gestapo called Ilse in for questioning. It seems they did not have enough evidence to arrest her, so they let her go with a warning. She also had to sign a document saying that she would cease all interactions with Jewish people or else she would be sent to a concentration camp. Ilse nevertheless continued her friendships with Jewish people.

In late 1942, Ilse befriended a Jewish woman named Ruth Basinski in Berlin. Knowing that Ruth was in danger, Ilse devised a plan to help Ruth escape from Germany. On the night between February 26-27, 1943, the two women made the daring journey over the border into Switzerland. Unfortunately, the Swiss border guards caught them and turned them over to the German police. Because she was Jewish, Ruth was deported to Auschwitz.



Undated photo of Ilse Totzke taken by the Gestapo. *Staatsarchiv Würzburg*

The Nazis transferred Ilse to Ravensbrück Concentration Camp in May 1943. She was liberated on April 26, 1945. Ruth Basinski also survived. After a short stay in Sweden after the war, Ilse moved to Paris, where she lived for several years. She moved back to Würzburg in 1954, and she was eventually granted compensation for the persecution she suffered under the Nazi regime. In the late 1950s, she moved back to her hometown of Strasbourg.

Ilse Totzke died in March 1987 at the age of 73. In 1995, Yad Vashem (Israel's national Holocaust memorial) honored Ilse Totzke as "Righteous Among the Nations," and in 2013, the city of Würzburg named a street after her.

Sources & Further Reading

Jutta Körner and Dorothea Kueller, "Ilse Totzke: Von Würzburg nach Yad Vashem." Bayerischer Rundfunk: BR Bayern 2. (April 6, 2014).

Jutta Körner and Dorothea Kueller, "Ilse Totzke," FemBio: Frauen, Biographieforschung.

Laurie Marhoefer, "Lesbianism, Transvestitism, and the Nazi State: A Microhistory of a Gestapo Investigation, 1939-1943," in American Historical Review Nr. 121, Issue 4 (Oct. 2016): 1167-1195.

Yad Vashem, "Rescue in Würzburg."

Read more about Ilse Totzke online. For more LGBTQ+ Stories from Nazi Germany, visit pinktrianglelegacies.com/stories.