

## **Behind the Book:**

### ***The Alice Network***

**By Kate Quinn**

#### **Voices of the Past: Letters and Trial Records**

Letters, trial records, memories . . . they give voice to the dead and breathe life into history. These are a few of the voices that rose from the past to inspire *The Alice Network*.

Excerpt of a letter, 1916

Louise de Bettignies after her trial, to her Mother Prioress

*You know, Mother, how much I need help and intercession near God for His mercy. My life was not without faults, and I have not been a model of gentleness and self-sacrifice. Since I am alone, I have had time to examine my life; what miseries I have discovered! I am ashamed of myself and the bad job I've made of my time and my health, my faculties and my freedom . . .*

*The decision of the council of war is not debatable. I accept my sentence with courage. During my operation, I envisioned death calmly and without fear; today I add a feeling of joy and pride because I refused to denounce anyone, and I hope those I saved through my silence will be grateful and thank me by keeping me in their prayers. I declare that I prefer the rigors of*

*my sentence to the dishonor of exonerating myself by denouncing those who did their duty to their country.*

*I ramble, Mother, being still under the emotion of the verdict; I'm all broken and without strength. Tomorrow I will be better.*

The leader of the Alice Network springs to vibrant life in every historical account she graces, courageous and outrageous at the same time. In 1914, France must have been full of women like her—impoverished gentlewomen turning their education to governess work or whatever genteel occupation they could find on the fringes of aristocratic society—but unlike the others, Louise de Bettignies did not content herself with nursing, bandage rolling, or traditional feminine war work. She wanted to fight, and what a fight it was. Her bravery was remarkable, but I found her humor and her self-awareness even more astounding—she is perhaps best summed up by an estimation made some thirty years later of a war correspondent: “He was a good soldier, and he had a way of laughing about things that was healthy.” Louise too had the priceless ability to laugh danger away. She remarked of the Germans, “They are too stupid! With any paper one sticks under their nose and plenty of self-possession, one can get through.” When urged to be more careful, she laughed, “Bah! I know I’ll be caught one day, but I shall have served. Let us hurry, and do great things while there is yet time.” When asked if she was ever frightened, she shrugged, “Yes, just like everyone else. But only after the danger was past; before then it is an indulgence.” She must have had her private dark moments—when sentenced to Siegburg she confessed with unsettling prescience, “I have a feeling I shall never return”—but she never allowed fear to stop her from doing her job, and doing it very well indeed. Her death may have been painful, but it found her unflinching—and if she felt at the end that she had not

done enough with her time and her faculties, others would certainly not agree. A member of the British Intelligence said years later, “Possibly, during the course of the war . . . one or two services equaled hers. Not one has ever surpassed it.”

Excerpt of a letter, 1919

Antoine Le Four after the liberation of Lille, to his sister

*This is a haunted city now and its people are the living ghosts. We live, we breathe, we go about our daily routines, but the color is gone, perhaps forever. For we who have seen so much, how can the world appear in other than mourning hues of grays and black? It seems the world around us has been no other way, and yet there was once music and art and life. People danced and sang. Life was beautiful here once, little sister, and that memory kept so many of us alive. I believe it can be that way again as long as we who loved this place so refuse to give up on it. I believe it because I must, for to believe that beauty gone forever would give them a victory my heart will not permit. War changes everything, this we know. Change is inevitable, but where does it say change must be eternal? We can never recover our innocence, but we can rebuild. No, we owe this to our dead: we must rebuild and this can only be done by those who knew what our city was before the war. For this reason, if no other, I must stay. You, my sister, of you, I would ask that you savor every moment and preserve the beauty around you for while I pray there will never be another war such as this, ours is a troubled history.*

Antoine Le Four was a citizen of Lambersart very near Lille, writing to his sister some nine months after the war was over. His words make poignant poetry of the wretched state of occupied France during the First World War. It was a period of unbelievable misery and oppression, and French citizens lived for years under daily reminders of the boot on their necks: clocks turned to German time, French streets given German names, the unbelievable shortages of food and fuel, the requisitioning of everything from weapons to soap to kitchen curtains. Starvation, imprisonment, abuse, and rape were constant hovering threats, and the legacy of such brutality cast a long shadow from World War I to World War II. It is facile to condemn the French for giving in to the Nazis too easily when many French citizens would have still borne the horrendous scars of the first occupation, would have clearly remembered having to stand back while German sentries robbed them of everything but the nearly inedible ration bread because the only alternative was to be arrested, beaten, or shot. The French survived not one but two brutal occupations in a span of less than forty years, and deserve more credit for their flinty endurance than they receive. "Those who have never suffered an enemy invasion in their own land," wrote another Lille citizen, "can never understand what war truly is."

Excerpt from trial records, 1953

Madame Rouffanche addresses the court

*"I ask that justice be done with God's help. I came out alive from the crematory oven; I am the sacred witness from the church. I am a mother who has lost everything."*

The massacre of Oradours-sur-Glane's inhabitants is a well-known tragedy in France thanks to the eerie surviving ghost town with its burned clocks and abandoned Peugeot and bullet-pocked walls—but it is less known outside France, where the tragic fate of one small village was subsumed into the broader account of Nazi atrocities. Madame Rouffanche's words as she recounted her rosary of horrors makes for a haunting voice from the past. She told her tale often over the course of her long life, most notably in Bordeaux in 1953 where she was called as a witness against the surviving SS soldiers who had been put on trial for their part in the massacre. She finished her testimony with the plea above, making a powerful impact on the courtroom. One onlooker wrote, "Her voice, without the smallest trace of easy sentiment, reaches us clear and implacable. She is Nemesis, calm and inexorable."