“Daß die Hölle so schön sein kann:” die wahre Geschichte über das Leben, den Tod, und die Flucht aus einem sowjetischen Gefangenenlager

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Abstract

The end of WWII found the German military in rapid retreat. As the Allies closed in and defeat became imminent, many of the German troops on the Eastern front began running in the opposite direction, hoping to surrender to the West instead of the Soviets. This fear of Soviet capture was not unfounded; the system of prison camps throughout the Soviet Union (i.e. gulags) was at this time in its third decade of operation and known for its brutality. So weit die Füsse tragen (in English As Far as My Feet Will Carry Me) tells the true story of Clemens Forell, a German prisoner of war interned on the East Cape of Siberia, as he endures and later escapes a gulag. This story was originally presented in the German novel by Josef Martin Bauer, drawn solely from his conversations with Forell. The story begins with Forell leaving to fight in August 1944 and quickly progresses to July 1945 as he is tried and convicted for ‘crimes against the Partisans.’ Forell is then sentenced to 25 years of forced labor, and so begins the story of his internment. The story continues through the deaths of several prisoners, as well as Forell’s two escape attempts, the second being successful. Determined to make his way home, Forell walks several thousand kilometers through the treacherous Siberian environment, but is always aware that the Soviets are chasing him. Throughout his struggle, the novel provides extensive and intense detail of Forell’s experiences, making the reader fully aware of their gravity. In 2003, this story was adapted to a film, also in German, which has its own benefits. Unable to contain every detail of the novel, the film version of Forell’s story maintains the essentials, while managing to appeal on an emotional and personal level unattainable through words alone. By adapting the book to the screen, the audience can feel the cold, pain, insanity, exhaustion, fear, etc. that Forell feels, making such an incredible and inimitable story accessible to all. However, instead of choosing one format over the other, the film and novel should be experienced together, as they merely enhance one another. Regardless of format, the story of Clemens Forell expounds something greater in addition to his individual struggle; As Far as My Feet Will Carry Me highlights the brutal and barbaric treatment of all prisoners in Soviet gulags, as well as the harsh conditions of the Siberian tundra. It also provides an internal look into the domestic and international politics surrounding the gulag system, as well as those issues unique to the German prisoners of war as aliens in the Soviet Union. Not only did the German prisoners face the constant threat of death, either as a result of their environment or on the order of their commanders, but they also dealt with the language barrier, which presented further problems to the prisoners. Within the struggle of the individual, Forell’s story offers a veiled commentary on the greater cultural and historical elements in the years following WWII, outside of the Cold War, and specifically with respect to the gulag system in the Soviet Union.