

A young Jewish woman's perilous travels and encounters among the ashes of immediate post-war Germany.

**Babylon Laid Waste:
A Journey in the Twilight of the Idols**
By Brigitte Goldstein

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A young Jewish woman's adventurous travels
among the ashes of post-war Germany.

Babylon Laid Waste

A JOURNEY IN THE
TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS

Brigitte Goldstein

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Prologue

Captivity

November 1946

Steinheim, Germany

US Army prison for female Nazi war criminals

Before I saw him, I heard his laughter. Before I gazed into his sparkling dark eyes, his laughter pierced the depth of my soul. Before his cackling made me sit on my haunches, my knees went to pulp. He was still laughing when he knocked over the bucket next to me with a cavalier kick, engulfing me in a puddle of grimy suds.

The toil of scrubbing latrine floors, the taunts from the hyenas whose quarters I shared, and the loss of hope for rescue or escape had numbed my senses and turned my heart into an insentient lump of stone. One more humiliation from a stranger who found sport in teasing me mattered none. What could it do to me? I would pull the carapace of indifference I had fashioned for myself since being tossed into this hell a bit tighter around me. Nothing, but nothing, would or could touch me, so I was telling myself a hundred times a day. I was immune to all gibes and sneers. Yet, my eyes must have betrayed me. I could not hide the flickering despair consuming my soul as well as I thought, at least not from this man who had appeared out of nowhere and was now standing over me, laughing with his arms akimbo.

“Maybe a toothbrush would help you do a better job, *gnädige Frau*.” He said “gracious lady”—an old-fashioned way of greeting a woman in polite society—in Austrian-inflected German with a gallant bow. Missing was the furtive kiss blown on the lady’s gloved hand.

What an absurd thing to say! I lifted my puzzled gaze at him from my crouched position, and for a brief second, our eyes rested on each other. His laughter extinguished like a shooting star. An awkward silence replaced the scornful mockery. The surrounding noises receded from the space between us. Only he and I existed. I, in a suppliant, almost prostrate pose, at his feet. His head tilted, one eyebrow raised, his hands to his sides, his squinting dark eyes peering down on me from an august height. His lips parted as if he was about to say something. Then, he shrugged and abruptly pivoted away with long, unhurried strides, leaving me on my knees engulfed in a welter of grimy suds.

From then on, whenever I marched out with the cleaning detail from the adjacent prison for female Nazi criminals, his unmistakable laughter resounded in the alleys between the rows of barracks. I started to listen for it. When I didn’t hear it for a while, a sense of dread clawed at my heart and stomach that he may have been a phantom, a figment of my feverish imagination.

The sound of his laughter had become a comfort to my wounded soul. Even at night, it reverberated in my fitful sleep. It warmed me when I lay awake on the hard bunk, shivering in the cold. I knew it was absurd to pin my hopes on a fleeting moment of recognition. But absurdity defined this universe ruled over by an insatiable beast eating away at my sanity.

My hopes—hopes for what? —seemed justified because I could always spot him when I entered the other camp. I felt his probing gaze wherever I was. He tried to approach me several times, but the MP guard barred him. Interacting with the prisoners was prohibited. Maybe they feared reprisals from the DP people against the German detainees. I would gladly lend a hand in any such action had it not been for Berlin, the goal of my journey, my looming, now seemingly unreachable, castle on the hill.

Then one day, I was alone again in the latrine, scrubbing the floor as usual. Crouched down on my knees, I perceived a figure cast its shadow over me.

“Don’t you think a toothbrush might do a better job?” For some unfathomable reason, he repeated the same absurd question. What was it with him and toothbrushes? But this time, his tone was somber. He wasn’t laughing or mocking.

“What do you want from me?” I asked in despair.

“I want to know who you are and why you are here?” His hands reached out to help me off the floor. Shunning his gesture, I got up and stood straight, facing him. He was half a head taller than I, slender rather than thin, and even athletic. Those dark eyes that seemed to delve into the bottom of the soul were most arresting.

“I am a prisoner of the United States military occupation forces,” I stated the obvious.

“I can see that. But why?” he pressed on. “What have you done to deserve this? You are not one of them.” He jerked his head disdainfully toward the Nazi women’s prison camp.

Then he added softly, as if whispering a secret, “You are *unsere Leut.*” One of us.

“What do you mean?”

I knew very well what he meant. I remembered the old saying I had heard so often growing up that a Jew could always recognize another Jew. Only Major Zweig seemed to have had no clue. Or did he? I didn't fool him, either. But why did he condemn me to this hellish place? Was he using me for a different purpose? I remembered him saying to his sergeant—did he know I understood what he was saying? — that my forged papers and had something to do with the people smugglers operating out of Amsterdam. Was he putting me in a holding cell until he could get to what was behind my presence? Was he hoping I could lead him to bigger fish? That would be a mean trick to play on a fellow Jew.

It also was a mean trick for me to play, impersonating a German. But I had a good reason. I had overcome many obstacles until I ran afoul of Major Zweig. Seen from his angle, his mission of ferreting out war criminals from among the general German population was more important than my desire to rescue an old woman, who may or may not be my grandmother. Neither she nor I mattered in the broader scheme of things. Broader schemes or a higher order aside, finding my grandmother remained the purpose of my journey.

Now the Major had disappeared or was unreachable, I was left to an uncertain fate. This man who seemed to take such apparent interest in me could help me out of this mess. I wondered what about me would make him think I was not one of the female Nazis. I had never considered myself to “look” particularly Jewish with my dishwater blondish hair and blue eyes. I never thought of it. But it was plain to the penetrating eyes of this man with the mocking laughter. Or was it something else, something beyond outward appearances?

Something more intrinsic, the baggage of history we carry around, the ankle chain that ties us all together?

“Kafka,” he said, extending a hand with a bright smile. Bewildered by this sudden introduction, I left his hand hanging in mid-air. “František Kafka from Prague. But you can call me Franz.” He dropped his hand but kept smiling as if to say: “Get it?”

“Safran, Artemisia Safran from New York” was at the tip of my tongue, but when I opened my mouth, what came out was “Beate Hauser from Berlin.” Both of his eyebrows now lifted upward, furrowing his brow with a skeptical grin.

“You are right about one thing,” I managed to say, trying to keep my trembling knees from buckling, “I’m not one of them. I was never a camp guard. I never saw the inside of a camp nor what went on there. Then they all say that, don’t they?”

The coincidence of his name, if this was indeed his name, with that of the famous writer made me suspect that his Kafka may be as fake as my Hauser. Whatever reaction he was trying to get from me, I thought it better not to take the bait and play dumb. A German woman with minimal education would not get this allusion to a Jewish writer. I kept what I hoped was a blank face.

How long we stood there facing each other, I don’t remember. We had reached an impasse. A wall had risen between us, which I knew not how to breach. As much as my heart nudged me on, I was unwilling to do something on impulse. My greatest fear was that my knees would buckle, and I would collapse again at his feet.

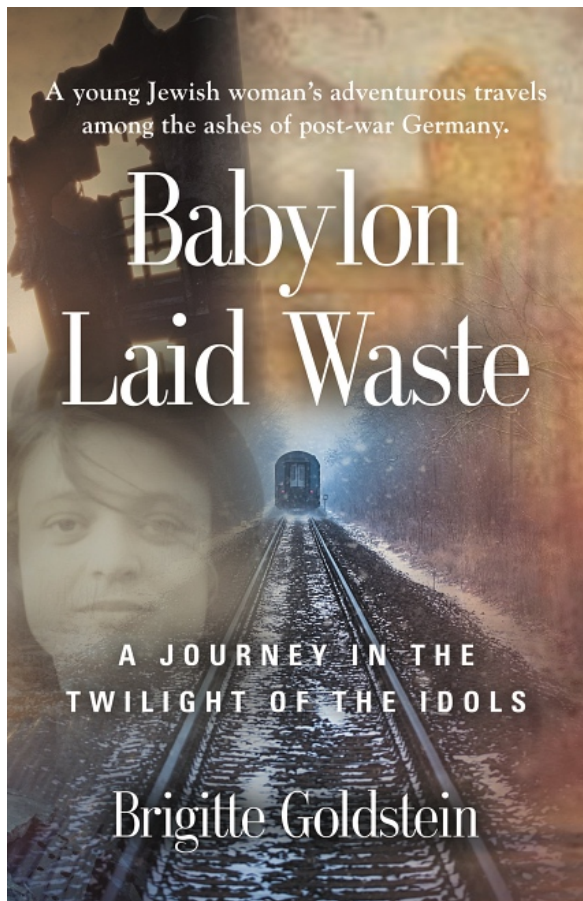
I was saved from further embarrassment by an approaching MP guard.

“Sir,” the soldier said politely but firmly. “No communicating with the prisoners.”

Without an apology to the guard or a nod toward me, the man who called himself Kafka shrugged and walked away with long, ponderous strides, his laughter echoing in the hollow canyon separating the two camps.

My eyes still followed the receding figure when a nudge in my back brought me down to reality. The soldier steered me back to the vipers’ nest at rifle point. Like a common criminal, I thought. When we reached the dividing barbed-wire fence, he stopped for a moment. He flicked his burning cigarette to the ground and stamped on it with a grinding motion of his foot. Any last glimmer of hope of finding a way out faded away.

How did I ever end up in such a living hell?



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