

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

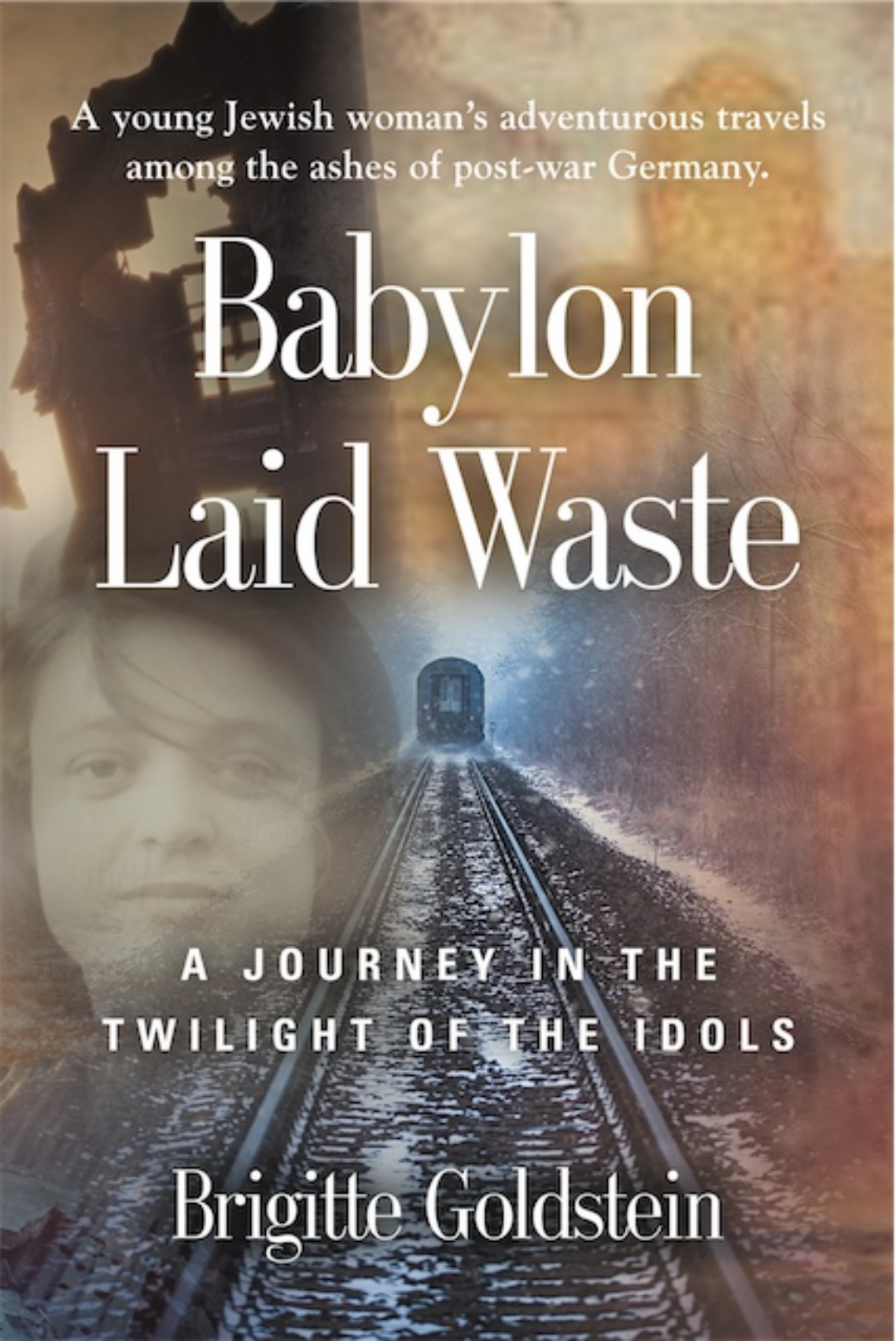
Babylon Laid Waste: A Journey in the Twilight of the Idols

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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Table of Contents

Prologue - Captivity.....	11
Part One - Fortress Babylon	17
Chapter 1 - A Letter from Berlin.....	18
Chapter 2 - Shabbat in Amsterdam	25
Chapter 3 - Veils of Deceptions	36
Chapter 4 - Frau Maibach.....	40
Chapter 5 - Major Zweig, US Army	56
Chapter 6 - Descent into Hell.....	66
Chapter 7 - A Recovered Memory.....	71
Chapter 8 - Peace on Earth	80
Chapter 9 - Deliverance	86
Part Two - Wanderings	89
Chapter 1 - Snowbound.....	90
Chapter 2 - Freedom Trail	95
Chapter 3 - A Thieves' Lair	104
Chapter 4 - Romantic Interlude	113
Chapter 5 - Paradise Lost.....	116
Chapter 6 - A Viennese Bon-Vivant	130
Chapter 7 - The Valkyrie.....	137
Chapter 8 - Immolations	142
Chapter 9 - Waiting for Zweig.....	153
Chapter 10 - The Old Benz	159
Chapter 11 - Olga from the Volga	168
Chapter 12 - Kafka in the Driver's Seat	173
Part Three - Twilight of the Gods.....	183
Chapter 1 - The Nibelungs Undomociled.....	184
Chapter 2 - The Wagnerian Shrine	187
Chapter 3 - Villa Lohengrin.....	196
Chapter 4 - Hannah	210
Chapter 5 - Summer Idyll.....	228
Chapter 6 - A Blood Banquet	241

Babylon Laid Waste

Chapter 7 - <i>Werewolf</i>	250
Chapter 8 - The Recital.....	254
Chapter 9 - Lovers in Retreat	272
Chapter 10 - Castle Montsalvat.....	281
Part Four - Crimes and Punishments.....	291
Chapter 1 - Odin, God of War.....	292
Chapter 2 - The Travel Companion.....	306
Chapter 3 - A World of Illusion	311
Chapter 4 - A Tale of Two Ghettos.....	318
Chapter 5 - A Paragon of the Master Race	333
Chapter 6 - <i>Kinder Aktion</i>	341
Chapter 7 - Here Comes the Cavalry!	349
Chapter 8 - Incarceration	354
Chapter 9 - A Count of Monte Christo	361
Chapter 10 - Kafka on Trial	366
Coda 1 - A Return Home	373
Coda 2 - Rebirth	388

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 up 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 was condemned to share, 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 seemed to find 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. Maybe I was not able to hide the flickering despair that was 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 arms akimbo and laughing.

“Maybe a toothbrush would help you do a better job, *gnädige Frau*.” He spoke the words “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 came to rest in each other’s. 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 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 slightly as if he were about to say something. Then, he shrugged and abruptly pivoted away with long, unhurried, ponderous 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 began to listen for it. On occasion when it wasn’t there, whenever it failed to reach my ears, dread began to claw 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 entire universe ruled over by an insatiable beast that ate away at my sanity.

My hopes—hopes for what? —seemed somehow justified by the fact that he was always somewhere within view of the corners of eyes when I entered the other camp. His probing gaze seemed to follow me where I happened to be. From the corner of my eyes, I perceived his scrutinizing look even when he was standing around the yard with his comrades engaged in animated talk. I recognized my father's Eastern European cadences. He would turn his head periodically, peering in my direction as if to assure himself and me that we were still connected. He even approached me several times but was barred by the rifle of an MP guard. Interacting with the prisoners was strictly 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 unattainable, castle on the hill.

Then one day, happenstance had it that I was alone in the latrine, scrubbing the floor as usual. Couched down on my knees a figure cast its shadow over me.

"Don't you think a toothbrush could do a better job?" For some unfathomable reason, he repeated the same absurd question. This time I noted his tone was very serious. He wasn't laughing. No 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 raised myself up in front of him, looking up at his serious mien. He was half a head taller than I, slender rather than thin, even athletic. Most arresting were those dark eyes that seemed to have the power of delving into a person's soul.

"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 in the direction of the Nazi women's prison camp.

Then he added, very softly, almost in a whisper, "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 inkling. Or did he? Maybe 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 papers were forged and that I may have something to do with the people smuggling ring operating out of Amsterdam. Was he putting me on hold, in a holding cell, so to speak, until he could get to what was behind my presence? Was he hoping I would 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. Looked at from this angle, so did Zweig. Maybe 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, who most likely had been through an ordeal so horrifying it made her lose her memory and her mind. Neither she nor I mattered in the broader scheme of things. Broader schemes or a higher order aside, to

find my grandmother was the purpose of this journey. I had overcome many obstacles along the way until I ran afoul of Major Zweig.

Since the Major had disappeared or was unreachable, I was left to an uncertain fate. Maybe this man who seemed to take such obvious interest in me could help me out of this mess. I wondered what it was about me that 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. Never even gave it much thought. But I guess it was plain to the penetrating eyes of this man with the mocking laughter who I was and where I came from. Or was it something else, something beyond outward appearances? Something more intrinsic, the baggage of history we all carry around with us, the ankle chain that ties us all together? In another time and place, I would have said: What bunk!

“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 on 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?”

What set my mind in uproar was the coincidence of his name, if this was indeed his name. Somehow, I suspected that his Kafka was 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 for my part knew not how to breach. As much as my heart nudged me on, I was not willing to do something on impulse. My greatest fear was that my knees would buckle, and I would collapse again at his feet.

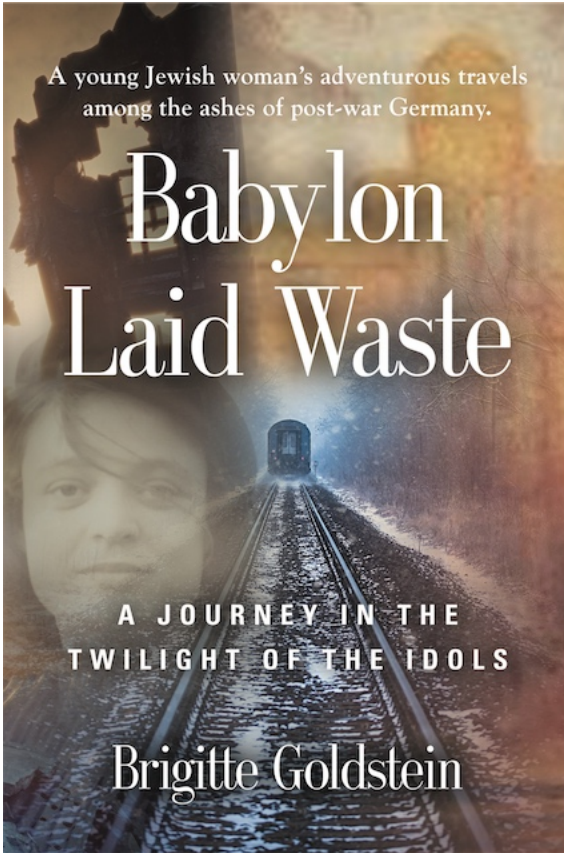
I was saved from further embarrassment by an approaching MP guard.

"Sir," he 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 were still pinned on the receding figure when a nudge in my back brought me down to the ground of 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 glimmer of hope of ever finding a way out was crushed out.

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



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