

**THE GLIMMER PALACE**  
**By Beatrice Colin**  
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**Contacts:**  
**Mih-Ho Cha**  
**Senior Publicity Director**  
**Tel.: 781-862-9833**  
**mih-ho.cha@us.penguin.com**  
**&**  
**Claire McGinnis**  
**Publicist**  
**Tel.: 212-366-2561**  
**claire.mcginis@us.penguin.com**

# **A Conversation with BEATRICE COLIN**

## **1. What inspired you to write this book?**

Just after I'd finished university, my father asked me if I would mind taking an elderly relative on holiday. My great aunt Nina, a Russian émigrée in her nineties who lived in Paris, disliked children and so I'd only met her once before. For the next five years I accompanied her on holiday to Cannes and then to Cabourg in Normandy. She insisted on travelling in an air-conditioned taxi from Paris and dining on smoked salmon and chilled red wine. A white Russian, she had escaped in 1920 and gone to Berlin. It was here that she started to work in the film industry. Glamorous, argumentative, decadent and extremely smart, she was initially outraged that I wasn't aware of a German film industry between the wars.

As well as working as an assistant to the producer, Alexander Korda, Nina had worked in a film press office and had been responsible for some outrageous stunts. For one film she handed out whistles to the press to blow if they didn't like the film – of course nobody did. At some point in the mid-twenties she married a producer and moved to Paris where she was responsible for promoting German films such as *Metropolis*. She was extremely chic; her apartment was featured in French Vogue and she spent much of the year travelling to film festivals in an open-topped Citroën.

The war, however, put an end to her career. As she was Russian, she was put in a camp for enemy aliens. When she was released, she travelled to Algeria where her husband was fighting with the Free French. By the end of the war, the glorious age of German cinema was over.

After returning from one of our holidays – she was very old and very cranky and so I was always rather relieved – I decided to read up on the period. What I discovered was an

amazing history, an explosion of creativity and innovation that was swiftly consumed by the forces of National Socialism and destroyed. All that I knew of the period came from Isherwood and Nabokov (who lived in Berlin briefly) and so was stunned to discover that it was far more extreme a place than I realized. I was inspired enough to plan a novel. After years of thinking about it – in which time Nina died - I decided that I would write two stories running parallel – an account of one woman’s life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany and a potted history of the country’s film industry. Looking back I wonder at the rationale of my decision. It was hugely ambitious and just a little nuts. It was, in part, an attempt to understand Nina and what she had lived through. She intrigued me because she was so unlike anyone I’d ever met before. As a journalist I also was convinced I’d found an epic true story, which needed to be told.

**2. How did you research it? How strictly is it based on fact?**

I researched the novel by reading a great many books, watching films from the period, looking at photographs and reading accounts by people who’d been there, on sites such as Project Gutenberg. What I wanted to do was to find a way of telling this history without being too academic. There was so much material that I had to choose carefully – too little fact and the whole thing would feel flimsy, too much and the narrative would be lost. I decided to try and bring it to life by looking for the kind of detail that you couldn’t invent, such as the butchering of the dead horse in the street – that came from a photograph – and by using images such as posters and promotional postcards to convey the atmosphere of the period.

I went to Berlin but found it had been so badly bombed that much of the city of that time had gone. This meant that I felt free to summon it up more clearly in my head. The geography of the city, however, the tram routes and the U and S Bahn stations are all, hopefully, accurate - I used a Baedeker guide to Berlin from 1912. The orphanage was invented as were all the people inside. All the films that Lidi makes are invented, too, but the description of the making of the film, *Kinetic* is based on the making of *Metropolis*. One of the few real historical characters is Goebbels. I read some of his writing so I felt able to summon up his voice.

**3. Was your main character, Lilly Nelly Aphrodite, modeled on an actual person?**

LNA isn’t based on anyone real but has elements of both Pola Negri and Marlene Dietrich

**4. We’ve had many popular books about the Nazi era and World War II, but not very many about the early decades of the twentieth century in Germany – World War I and the Weimar Republic, in particular. Why do you think this period has been relatively neglected in popular literature?**

I’m not sure why nobody has written about it before. I’ve been told that the Germans still find the whole time too painful. The film *Cabaret* left such a powerful impression that maybe writers felt it had been done. Personally, I think that *Cabaret* says far more about the 70s when it was made, rather than the 20s.

**5. Why did you choose to write about the rise of the film industry as well as the great upheavals of history?**

I feel that the rise of and fall of the film industry echoed the political and social history of the period perfectly. It encapsulated what happened to a nation and, in a wider sense, to the world. The distorted, nightmarish films of the 20s came out of a culture that had suffered greatly and had in some ways, gone mad – for example, the inflation took any sense of normality away and tore down all moral codes. Also I think we are still grappling with the legacy of the Holocaust. To get any real sense of why Hitler came to power and why he was able to perpetrate such atrocities, we need to look closely at the culture that produced him.

**6. The novel follows the parallel lives of Lilly and her best friend, Hanne. While Lilly eventually enjoys great success as an actress, Hanne goes downhill quickly. Is what she endured representative of the experiences of young German women of her time?**

Hanne is a character who has already been so badly damaged that by the time that Lilly meets her she is used to the idea that her body can be used as currency. Lilly, in contrast, only resorts to this once, at the end of the book. Although Ilya is Lilly's true love, in some ways the central relationship in the book is between Hanne and Lilly. I wanted to chart the shift in their relationship, as their roles swap round. Hanne is, I think, fairly representative of women in Berlin at that time. Accounts of the period suggest that thousands of men and women, and boys and girls were on the game. There were a huge variety of prostitutes; half-silks, or office workers who came out at 5pm, pregnant women, doll boys or young boys dressed as girls, etc.

**7. What role does Sister August, the nun who runs the orphanage where Lilly and Hanne find refuge, play in your novel and in Lilly's life?**

Sister August is the first person who Lilly learns to love - throughout the book she keeps searching. She is also a modern woman who doesn't seem to fit into the world she has been born into. She has her own problems regarding intimacy and coming to terms with what she has lost by her choice to be a nun. She seeks a new way but doesn't quite manage to escape the old one.

**8. What was Berlin like in the early twentieth century? What were its unique qualities? What set it apart from other cities?**

Berlin was the largest, most modern city in the world at the turn of the century. Everybody read newspapers and commuted to work on public transport. It was also a fairly young city with people coming from the countryside to work in the factories. Berliners were not like other Germans and were, and maybe still are, considered slightly coarse with a caustic sense of wit and a disregard for authority. That set them apart from the rest of the country.

In the early twenties, the city must have been hugely exciting, but, with civil war raging in the streets, it would also have been dangerous. Rather than dampening its atmosphere it seemed to give it even more of an edge. New industry and new wealth, as well as old, meant that most people had a disposable income and were looking for new kinds of experiences and entertainment, such as cinema. It was also a city that was constantly reinventing itself; there was an ongoing building program with enormous new department stores with dazzling

displays, and new multi-storey buildings. It was unique, I suppose, because it was a place where anything must have seemed possible. From music to science and from cinema to architecture, the city produced an explosion of innovation and exciting new work by figures such as Albert Einstein, Walter Gropius and Bertolt Brecht. Berlin was a true capital in every sense of the word, politically, socially and culturally. It is still a unique city – the layers of history are visible but it still lives entirely in the present.

**9. What were the tingle tangle clubs? How were they emblematic of Germany in the pre-World War I era?**

Tingle-tangles were bars where you could buy a beer and watch some entertainment. They were usually aimed at working men and the shows were pretty tacky. Girls sometimes sold postcards of themselves to make some more money on the side. I'm not sure how emblematic they were – there was a huge cabaret scene too. I just love the sound of the word. I think it comes from jingle-jangle; tingle tangle. .

**10. When did the film business get started in Germany? Was there one dominant company? What brought the industry to a crisis point even before the Nazis seized power?**

The film industry started at the same time as it did in the rest of the world, in the late 1890s. When they realized that there was a sustainable market and a growing demand, lots of entrepreneurs got involved. In Germany there were initially many small producers but they amalgamated when all the biggest were bought by the Government and became Ufa in 1917. The company thrived just after the war and into the early 20s despite the inflation and the war reparations. The reasons for its downfall are complex - the Parafumet agreement which led to the German market being flooded with American films, the fact that Ufa was sold off to a right-wing business man in 1927, and some very bad choices. The film, *Metropolis* was a catastrophic mistake – it cost far more than it ever made back at the box office. One of the interesting things about the German industry, however, is that it had an entirely different aesthetic from any other. It was far more theatrical, expressionistic and experimental. Many of its top practitioners moved to America and the German influence can be seen decades later in Film Noir and the horror films of the thirties.

**11. How was the persecution of the Jews carried out in the film industry?**

The film industry was 'cleansed' - Jews weren't allowed to work in the film industry unless under special dispensation after March, 1933, and many of Ufa's top actors, directors, technicians, composers and writers had their contracts terminated. Many of them such as Peter Lorre, Elizabeth Bergner and Fritz Lang moved away to America and France. Of those who remained, dozens disappeared or were eventually arrested and sent to concentration camps. The Nazis went on to make anti-Semitic films such as *Jew Suss* and *The Eternal Jew*. The actor and director, Kurt Gerron, was arrested and forced to make a propaganda film called, *The Fuhrer presents the Jews with a City*, which was meant to convince the world that Theresienstadt was a 'model ghetto.' Once the film was finished all the people who had worked on were sent to Auschwitz and murdered.

- 12. The cultural decadence of the Weimar era has been memorably portrayed before in popular culture, most notably in the stage musical and film *Cabaret*. But you explore it much more extensively in your novel. Why did it have such a hard and sometimes sinister edge?**

Although the Weimar Republic seems to have had a wonderfully glamorous, decadent, hedonistic, dangerous edge, I think the reason it was so incredibly carnivalesque was that what happened before and afterwards was so terrible, so extreme, that people seemed to live life much more acutely. It was a time where vices such drugs and prostitution were only selectively enforced, where crime was rampant and where homosexuality and pornography were openly accepted. You could do anything and be anyone. It was only a brief moment of respite from war, famine and civil war, however, before the country was plunged into the nightmare of the Third Reich.

- 13. As you describe in the novel, Germany was in a state of enormous political and social upheaval, as well as often violent confrontation between left and right, during the period between the two world wars. How does your character Eva, the well-to-do young woman who becomes a communist, embody these struggles?**

Hmm, interesting question. Eva turns to Communism and away from her own class because, as a lesbian, she realizes that she will never be accepted. I'm not sure how politically motivated she really is – I think she needs an identity and given the choice of right and left, she chose left. I wanted to show her slow brutalization - early on in the novel she is really quite benign. But life in Berlin slowly changes her. She is shocked when Lilly kills a cockerel but is soon able to carry out far more inhumane acts without any conscience.

- 14. Eva is also a lesbian. A more open expression of homosexuality was one of the hallmarks of the Weimar era, yet it is considered by some to be part and parcel of the general debauchery of the time. How would you respond to that view?**

I think initially there was a backlash against all the restraints of Prussian conformity. The city was growing fast and full of immigrants from Russia, Poland and from other places such as Argentina. Lots of people were passing through and that must have instilled a sense of flux, which introduced new ideas and art forms such as the tango and jazz. Later on in the twenties Berlin became a destination for sex tourists and there are numerous guides which detailed what could be seen and where.

Eva is represented as a woman who is innately homosexual rather than an experimenter. Twenty years earlier or later she would have had to suppress her sexuality. The Weimar Republic meant that she was able to be openly gay.

- 15. How does the runaway inflation of the Weimar period affect Lilly and Hanne? How did it affect German society?**

The inflation doesn't affect Lilly and Hanne as badly as it did others as they didn't have much to lose – no property or expensive possessions. It did mean that they had to face the prospect of starvation again. It also ruined Hanne's marriage – she married for security and that was instantly lost. As for the rest of the population, inflation undermined everything they believed in. Their savings became worthless and they had to choose between eating and

their family heirlooms. The middle-classes completely collapsed. I don't think the Jewish population had it any easier but in times of great upheaval and hardship there is a tendency to become xenophobic. I think that the Germans felt extremely aggrieved; they had lost the war, lost their husbands and sons and now because of the inflation, they lost everything else. They began to crave a strong leader, a father figure who wouldn't let this happen to them again.

**16. As your novel observes, Germans continued to go to the movies during the very worst of the inflation, when they could barely afford food. What were they seeking and finding in the “glimmer palaces”?**

In the cinemas they could escape. They could travel to distant lands and lose themselves in narratives that made the kind of moral sense that had almost vanished from real lives. In films, the wicked were always caught and punished and the worthy found love. There was also a great catharsis to be found there, one which they could share with the rest of the audience. On a practical level too, cinemas were warm and many couldn't afford to heat their homes. But I think that the magic of cinema is something that we all still appreciate today. There is nothing quite like it.

**17. As World War II approaches, Lilly is wooed by Hollywood and relocates to California. But the move is not successful for her, as it was not for many foreign actors. Why?**

As far as I know, American studios had a habit of buying up stars for their stables to stop any other studio from using them. There were a lot of actors with contracts who didn't actually do any work. Emil Janning, went to Hollywood and never appeared in any films. Pola Negri, who was a huge star in Germany, only made three films in the US. The public decided they didn't like her after she made a spectacle of herself at Rudolph Valentino's funeral and she wasn't offered any more roles. Also the move from silent to talkie was a death knell for dozens of actors. Being German made the transition even more difficult.

**18. After her move to America, Lilly is invited back to Germany by Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, to make a film. Was this typical of the way the Nazis manipulated culture to enhance their image?**

When the Nazis came to power, most of Germany's well-known actors and practitioners had been sacked or had moved away and there was a real shortage of talent. Goebbels began to try and woo back some of them such as Erich Pommer and Fritz Lang. They refused. He wrote to other popular stars such as Marlene Dietrich and Pola Negri and begged them to come back. Dietrich refused but Negri apparently returned briefly. Emil Jannings came back and appeared in dozens of anti-Semitic films. Henny Porten was asked to divorce her Jewish husband or she wouldn't be offered any more film work. She declined. Goebbels understood the power of cinema and wanted to use it to convey his party's beliefs. He wanted the old stars to lend credibility as the new regime had failed to create as many home-grown stars. Maybe it was because the roles offered were so narrow. Women on screen were portrayed either as self-sacrificing mothers or sultry women of the world. To make sure they chose the right kind of women, Goebbels himself was involved in the casting.

**19. What did you set out to achieve with this novel? What do you see as most distinctive about it?**

I wanted to write two parallel histories, one real but fictionalized, the other fiction but using historical fact. I also wanted to look at this period of history specifically from a woman's point of view and look at the effect that historical events have on the domestic, the romantic and the social, rather than focusing on the broad sweep of history and the male experience. The inclusion of photographs helps to suggest that the whole thing is authentic, a faux history that could be true. It aims to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction.

**20. What do you hope readers take away from it?**

The most important thing, I hope, is that the reader has made an emotional connection. I want them to feel moved and to feel the same sense of loss that Ilya and Lilly feel at the end. I also would love them to feel that they have discovered a group of compelling and yet flawed characters who will stay with them. I also hope that feel they have experienced another era, and, although it is still inexplicable, a sense that that the build-up to the Holocaust didn't happen overnight.

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