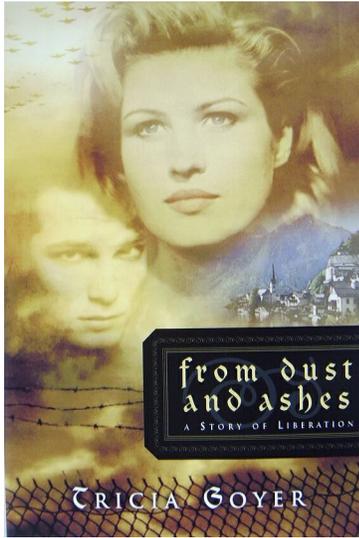


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### **From Dust to Ashes: The Story Behind the Novel**

I can clearly remember when my interest was first sparked by the liberation events that took place in St. Georgen, Austria during World War II. An Austrian historian had invited me and my friends into her home, serving up tea and bread, meat and cheeses. It was the end of a long day of travel, and I secretly desired a hot shower and a soft bed. But it wasn't long before our host had me intrigued with her true tales of villains, prisoners, and GI heroes.

I sat—eyes wide—as Marta described the twenty-three, American GIs who had stumbled upon the Gusen camps May 5, 1945. I imagined their horror as they witnessed prisoners reduced to skin and bones. Or worse, piles of corpses. But Marta also spoke of other things, such as the first help to enter the camp—a young Nazi wife with her children on tow. *Who was she?* I wondered. Obviously she had not believed in the Nazi persecution. *What would it have been like to helplessly witness such horror? How was her life forever changed?*

I also imagined those prisoners who were mere days from death. *How did they go on after facing such hatred, such loss?* Just the night before, on a dinner cruise in Prague, I had sat elbow to elbow with a young Jewish girl and her brother. “Fifty years ago, they would have been killed,” my friend whispered in my ear as we talked and laughed with our new friends. It was then that the horrors of WWII became real, and I knew I would never be the same.

After we left Marta's house that night, I turned to my two travelling companions—also fiction writers. "Are you going to write about this?" At that moment their "no's" became my "yes."

I went home with much excitement and began researching the events concerning the liberation of Gusen and Mauthausen death camps. But I soon realized no articles or fuzzy, black and white photos could ever take the place of speaking with those who were actually there. So in August 2001, I was invited to attend the 59<sup>th</sup> reunion of the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. In Kalamazoo, Michigan, I spoke to the brave men, now in their 70's and 80's who had liberated the death camps. Their bodies have aged, but in their hearts they are still the same brave, young soldiers who witnessed so much.

As the research progressed, I was also able to visit Austria a second time to participate in the memorial services celebrating liberation so many years prior. And while there, I spoke with others, including a man who was just twelve-years-old in 1945. I was awed as he led me through the streets where former SS houses still stand. And tears formed in my eyes as I stood before the guesthouse of the brave, Nazi wife, now gone.

So fueled by memoirs, oral histories and personal interviews, I began to write. And in my mind, the streets of St. Georgen and the events of 1945 soon became as real as life around me.

On that sunny day in October, my greatest concern had been resting after a long day of travel. It was only later, after months of writing, that I realized God's intentions were far greater. His plan was to have me share a story of liberation. A story inspired by true events . . . and true heroes.