

Ben Pastor was born in Italy and lived for thirty years in the United States, working as a university professor in Illinois, Ohio and Vermont, before returning to her native country. *The Venus of Salò* is the eighth in the Martin Bora series published by Bitter Lemon Press and follows on from the success of *The Night of Shooting Stars*, *The Horseman's Song*, *The Road to Ithaca*, *Tin Sky*, *A Dark Song of Blood*, *Liar Moon* and *Lumen*. She is the author of other novels including the highly acclaimed *The Water Thief* and *The Fire Waker*, and is considered one of the most talented writers in the field of historical fiction. In 2008 she won the Premio Zaragoza for best historical fiction, and in 2018 she was awarded the prestigious Premio Internazionale di Letteratura Ennio Flaiano.

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# THE VENUS OF SALÒ

Ben Pastor

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## MAIN CHARACTERS

### GERMANS

**Martin-Heinz von Bora**, Colonel in the German army  
**Lübbe-Braun**, Bora's second-in-command  
**Antonius Sohl**, Lieutenant General in the German army  
**Klaus-Etzel Lipsky**, Major in the German army, Sohl's aide  
**Herbert Kappler**, Lieutenant Colonel in the SS  
**Egon Sutor**, Kappler's adjutant  
**Eugen Dollmann**, Colonel in the SS  
**Jacob Mengs**, Gestapo agent  
**Albert Kesselring**, Field Marshal in the German army  
**Karl Wolff**, General in the SS  
**Zachariae**, Mussolini's private physician

### ITALIANS

**Giovanni Pozzi**, textile industrialist  
**Anna Maria "Annie" Tedesco**, his daughter  
**Walter Vittori**, Pozzi's brother-in-law  
**Rodolfo Graziani**, Commander-in-Chief of the Italian  
Republican Army  
**Emilio Denzo di Galliano**, Graziani's aide  
**Gaetano De Rosa**, Captain of the Republican National Guard  
**Cesare Vismara**, Inspector in the Italian Police  
**Passaggeri**, Inspector in the Italian Police  
**Moses Conforti**, antiquarian and photographer

**Bianca Spagnoli**, former music teacher  
**Marla Bruni**, soprano  
**Fiorina Gariboldi**, Marla Bruni's maid  
**Miriam Romanò**, seamstress  
**Xavier Cristomorto**, freelance partisan leader  
**Vittorio** and **Italo**, partisan leaders, moderate faction  
**J.V. Borghese**, Commander, X MAS (10th Marine Infantry  
Division)



## GLOSSARY

**Abwehr:** The Third Reich's military counter-espionage service

**Albergo:** Italian for "hotel"

**Animo:** Italian for "Have courage!"

**Atarot:** In the Jewish tradition, crown-shaped embellishments for the Torah scroll

**Ausserkommando SS Mailand:** SS Foreign Command, Milan

**Bandengebiet:** German for "bandit territory"

**Bedenken Sie es:** German for "Mind yourself"

**Besamim:** Tower-shaped spice and perfume boxes, in Jewish tradition

**Brigadenführer:** SS military rank, equivalent to the rank of army major

**Casa del Fascio:** Italian for "Fascist centre"

**Commissario:** Italian for "police inspector"

**Daven:** In Judaism, the back-and-forth motion of the torso during prayer

**Drei Hundert Rosen:** "Three Hundred Roses", a popular German song

**Durchgangslager:** A transit camp for inmates and undesirables

**Einsatzgruppen:** Special SS units created to eliminate Jews, gypsies and political opponents in the occupied territories

**Ganz genau:** German for "good enough"

**Generalleutnant:** Lieutenant general, in German army and air force

**Gnädige Frau:** German for "kind lady"

**Hauptsturmführer:** SS military rank, equivalent to the rank of army captain

**Kripo:** Contraction of "Kriminalpolizei", the German criminal police

**Luftwaffe:** The German air force

**Malachim ha-Maveth:** Angels of Death, in the Jewish tradition

**Obergruppenführer:** A high rank in the SS, second only to Heinrich Himmler's rank of Reichsführer

**Obersturmbannführer:** SS military rank, equivalent to the rank of army lieutenant colonel

**Organization Todt:** German civil and military engineering organization

**Permesso:** Italian for "May I..."

**Pinkas:** A ledger listing the principal events in a Jewish community

**Platzkommandant:** German title for the commander of a given area

**Radiosender:** German radio station

**Reichsmarschall:** Marshal of the Reich, the rank given to Hermann Göring

**Reichsprotector:** Nazi governor of the Bohemia-Moravia protectorate in Czechoslovakia

**Rimmonim:** Silver finials decorating the staffs around which the Torah parchment is rolled

**SD:** Short for "Sicherheitsdienst", the SS Secret Service

**Shekinah:** In Judaism, the spirit and actual presence of God

**Shivviti:** In Judaism, a small case containing a prayer scroll from the Psalms

**Sipo:** Contraction of "Sicherheitspolizei", the Internal Security Police of the Third Reich

**Si vergogni:** Italian for "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

**Soldatensender:** German army radio

**Spielcasino:** German army entertainment hall

**Standartenführer:** Paramilitary rank in various Nazi organizations, equivalent to the rank of army colonel

**Via, via:** Italian for "Go, go!"

**Wehrmacht:** Official name of the German army, 1935–46

*Venus smiles not in a house of tears.*

SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*



960TH GERMAN GRENADIER REGIMENT HQ NEAR  
MT CASSIO, SATURDAY, 14 OCTOBER 1944

The voice spoke Russian. It cut through the dark, slicing it like paper, and the shreds were not to mend again. Martin Bora did not want to open his eyes, did not want to know whether it was night or not, whether this was Russia or not. As with voices in dreams, the sounds seemed to be inside him – inside the dark within – not travelling to him from elsewhere. Surely, if he stretched, he'd feel the jagged top of the wall and mud cleaving to his boots, but he didn't. Instead, he lay there on his back. He did not recall lying on his back when the Russian dogs smelled him and strained furiously at the leash.

There was no wall, no mud. And the voice was harsh, but no longer speaking Russian.

Darkness broke.

Bora opened his eyes. The blinding glare of a torch filled them, causing him to blink; no place in his skull was safe from it. He recoiled from the brightness without averting his face.

“Get up,” the voice said.

Something told him it was useless to seek the handgun at his bedside. Elbows propped on the mattress, Bora tried to make sense of things, much as one stumbles through spider webs, becoming tangled in their gummy wraiths. “What happened, what is it?”

The flood of light waved aside, just enough for him to discern civilian clothes, a baggy overcoat. A hefty man, middle-aged, a beefy jaw unhinging to speak.

“Gestapo. Get up, Colonel von Bora.”

Bora stiffened across his shoulders. He was not awake enough to rally his wits, but enough to taste fear. Dog-tired, exhaustion overwhelmed him in bed despite the ever-present pain in his mutilated left wrist; he took penicillin and what not for it, but the injections hurt and he could not say they helped. So he stared into the glare, befuddled, resisting the temptation to ask, “What is the charge?” – a phrase that was second nature to all of them in those years. Instead, as he freed his legs from the quilts, he repeated, “What happened?”

The man said nothing. When Bora went to stand up and reach for his uniform across the chair, another figure flung his riding breeches at him from the dark.

“Get dressed.”

Many times, he’d wondered what he would feel at a moment like this. The truth was that formless panic took over everything else. *This has to be Russia*, he made himself think. *Had better be*. Red Army voices from the past were still inside him, speaking not so differently from the man before him. He heeded all of them, automatically.

The whiteness of his underwear exposed him, lean and briefly vulnerable: at once, he began to cover it up with the field grey of the uniform. He slipped into his breeches, laced them with one hand and was halfway through buckling his prosthesis when the army shirt flew at him. He donned that, too, pressured into fitting himself.

The glare stayed on him; that invisible someone else was now rummaging in his dresser. Bora heard the army footlocker slam shut. The shaft of light moved up as he stood buttoning his tunic. The army cap came his way, and he put it on.

“What about my men?”

They shoved him forward, walked him through the dim silence of the small requisitioned house. “They know you’re leaving. Your things are packed.”

No sentry stood at his post by the front door. What appeared to be an unmarked, civilian car waited with the engine running. Under a sad drizzle, Bora was let into the back seat. The burly man sat down beside him; the other placed his footlocker in the trunk, and the car took off. Eyed furtively, the phosphorescent hands on his wristwatch read 11:04.

The mountain trail rolled bumpily under the wheels; it climbed at first, only to negotiate a zigzag of narrow bends before reaching what had to be the state highway. They were heading north, surely. Bora sat facing forward, although the dark in the car was nearly as solid as in his bedroom. Splintered trees and devastated farms must have been pitching and bobbing up like wrecks in that sea of darkness. Bora imagined them as they kept heading downhill. He was cold, fatigued, yet alert now and totally tense. In and out, he tried to breathe through his diaphragm to relax, but it was no use. Worse. As drowsiness left him, stabbing pangs started in his forearm, a rapid irreversible progression until it became a bloody pain. He folded his left arm against his chest and clutched his elbow, thumb and forefinger pressed hard against the sore flesh-covered bone. Trying to conceal his suffering, he felt the envelope inside his chest pocket – Nora Murphy’s note on Red Cross stationery, carried around unopened for a week before he decided to read it. *If I have to die*, he thought, *it might as well be now that she tells me.*

Without turning to the man at his side, he asked, “Where are we going?” And, having received no answer, he sullenly minded the twists and turns of the car. The river valley below, that much he knew, led to a fork in the road, west to Piacenza

and east to Parma. The latter route eventually led to Germany. *God always has mercy*, she had written him. *In His wisdom, He has seen to it that my un hoped-for present happiness ...* She did not say so exactly, but he understood she might have fallen pregnant: the side effect of victory toasts on her diplomat husband, in liberated Rome. *I cannot be so bold as to pretend to know what the future holds in store for us, Colonel, but you must promise that you will, between now and then, open your heart to what other love may come your way.* She had underlined *other*, not *promise*. It might mean something. He did not reread Nora's message: only folded it along the crease, replaced it in its envelope and slipped it into the pocket over his heart. In time, everything makes sense. Losing his left hand to a grenade attack, the annulment of his marriage, that brief, impossible passion for a married woman. Even a sort of bittersweet solace for having no impediments, if love ever were an impediment to death.

Half an hour, one hour went by. Through the corner of his eye, Bora perceived the bulk of the man beside him; from the rustle of waterproof cloth, he knew he was reaching inside his trench coat. He held his breath until he perceived the pungent, medicinal aroma of a cough drop.

"May I know why I'm being spirited off?"

Again, no reply. The engine pitch changed as the car reached level ground. Now and then, they went around an obstacle or rode the shoulder. They gained speed, slowed down to a creep. A roadblock came up, and with it a dozen godforsaken right places for firing a bullet through his head. *We shall dissolve into Nothing* – Georg Heym's poem came to his mind. *We shall dissolve into Nothing* – but he could not recall the lines that followed.

A damaged, near-illegible road sign went by – the outskirts of Parma, home to Army HQ 1008. Once again, from here they could go left or right, or ahead to the Po River and its



war-ravaged bridges. He settled into his habit of self-control over pain and fear.

By and by, he realized they were indeed coming to the river, where by coincidence or design, docked to a wooden platform on the bank, an unsteady but workable ferry waited to carry them over. Then came a rough regaining of the road, in the eerie distant glimmer of an air raid God knows where on the horizon. Bombed-out villages, bleak detours, shortcuts through the fields and along canals. At every crossing, Bora tried to think of where the next SS or army headquarters might be. As far as he could tell, they kept heading north. He recognized the turn-off towards Brescia, home to three SS commands at least, and to Army HQ 1011. Still they kept going. Every so often, German soldiers or Italian guardsmen stopped them at checkpoints. Bora was thinking of a letter to his parents, whether he should have written one or would be allowed to write one. Whether there'd be time for it after all.

Three wordless hours and more went by, through the damp autumn night, a pitilessly long stretch of time to mull over his life and what lay ahead. At Montichiari Bora identified the last possible turn-off – to an airfield, Ghedi, from where he could be flown off to Germany – but still the car headed north. Sinking into his deepest layer of animal-like forbearance, he found a dull equidistance between resignation and fear.

If not Ghedi, or Brescia, was it the lake they were heading for? Lake Garda, of course. Yes, yes. They would soon seek the steep, narrow Garda shore. Barely visible hills floated on both sides of the car. A downhill stretch, followed by the bristle of shadowy cypresses and a series of curves where palm trees drew the fanciful outlines of exotic belvederes. The lake must be ahead; no, to the right. Below them, to the right. Despite his stoicism, Bora was startled when the car came to a stop by a blind wall, slightly at an angle.

He didn't move until they opened his door to let him out. It seemed forever, with the engine still running. Bora heard the trunk unlock, then the dull sound of his footlocker being dropped on the road. Both car doors slammed shut again.

By and by, he became aware of raindrops tapping the visor of his cap and the shoulder boards of his greatcoat. He smelled the lake, heard the sigh of branches under the rain. It was a swift, dizzy awakening, as from anaesthesia, one sense at a time. The car had gone. The faint sinking of tail-lights far into the night made him suddenly furious. A terrific anger worked its way up inside him at the idea that his anguish had been for nothing; that this was somehow routine army business. The physical urge to pummel somebody kept him there, breathing hard, until he came back to his self-control. Across the road, as far as he could make out in the now pelting rain, several cars sat head-to-tail in front of a garden gate. Barely visible against the glare of a front door ajar, a sentinel at the gate clicked his heels when Bora approached. A scent of wilted flowers and moist leaves came to his nostrils. And the sharp smell of a doused fire.

"What is this building, soldier?"

"Lieutenant General Sohl's residence, sir."

"The town?"

"Salò."

Inside, the bright entryway seemed blinding after the dark. A blue-grey-clad orderly behind a desk sprang to his feet. "Colonel von Bora?" He stared at the papers handed to him. "Lieutenant General Sohl was expecting you tomorrow, sir." Still, he promptly led him into the next room. The confusion of voices that met Bora's entrance alerted him that he was neither the reason, nor the focus of it. Ignoring him, worried-looking air force non-coms left muddy tracks on the carpet as they milled about. A civilian with the frumpy air of a police

official, swollen-eyed with sleep, the top button of his coat driven into the wrong hole, strained to hear somebody – an interpreter? – speaking of “thieves” and “Italian responsibilities”. Bora overheard an impatient “What?” from the doorway of a third room, a muffled grumble and, “He arrived at this hour?” It *was*, after all, barely three in the morning.

Wearing breeches and boots, but in his shirtsleeves, Lieutenant General Sohl walked over to see him. Tall and rotund, with a shaven head, he resembled the voracious monks you see painted on beer jugs. To Bora’s salute he replied, “I appreciate your zeal for the assignment, but we were expecting you tomorrow morning.” And because Bora enquired at once about his orders, he let show an edge of anxious spite. “You see, this is not a good time, Colonel. Be so good as to report here in the morning as scheduled. Hager, accompany the colonel to his hotel. Where is your luggage, Colonel?”

Bora resented the tone more than the dismissal. “Out there in the middle of the street, where it was dumped. General Sohl, I wonder if you are aware of the mode of my summons.”

“Tomorrow, Colonel: you’ll tell me all about it tomorrow.” Sohl motioned to the Italian police official to follow him, and turned away.

Just as Bora was leaving the building, a bearded old man in his pyjamas and overcoat was being unceremoniously dragged in from the rain.

Hager, this young but savvy man, was the sort of busybody who thrives in command posts, the sort from whom intelligence officers, as Bora knew well from experience, can learn all sorts of useful details. Driving him down a narrow street, the airman actually relished being prompted. “They threw a hand grenade over the garden’s back fence two hours ago. Yes, sir, it does happen occasionally, even here in town. We don’t pay much attention as long as it’s just noise and a spurt

of flames. No damage to speak of, but in the commotion that followed a painting went missing. A large artwork, showing a naked girl in bed. The general is concerned, because the villa and its furnishings belong to Signor Pozzi, and he says there are bound to be complaints. The bearded old man? No, sir. He's just a Jew, an art expert."

They reached a small piazza with a war memorial, by a docking basin. "Albergo Metropoli," Hager announced, coming to open the passenger's door. A dank odour of wet gravel and drenched wood wafted in from the shore. Water made lush, sucking sounds, as if the invisible lake were turning its tongue in its mouth. The road was all a puddle, in which Bora's boots sank to the ankle. His long-repressed anger blew its top a moment later in the hotel lobby, when they assigned him a corner room without a toilet. He had a German colleague thrown out of bed and dislodged at once from his suite, into which he, Bora, moved without even waiting for the other to retrieve his things.

SALÒ, SUNDAY, 15 OCTOBER 1944

Everything was there. Uniforms, handgun, books, letters. Maps, sketches. Snapshots. Condoms, aspirin. His briefcase. Two of the books had broken spines, but his cloth-bound diary was safe. Bora had already gone through his footlocker the night before, still giddy with relief at not having been arrested after all, or shot, but anxious to make sure his belongings were safe. That morning, as he shaved, the face in the mirror had its usual firm coolness; it looked rather dispassionate these days. On the reflecting surface, through a window rimmed with white tiles, the waterline glowed under a sunbeam. Lakes had never been Bora's favourite places. And *this* lake, in particular.