

LIFE SENTENCE



"For [Bora], the challenge is not to contravene his ethical standards while excelling in his role as an officer in the field"

Knight, Death, and the Devil, Or: How to Help Your Protagonist Save His Soul

BY BEN PASTOR

“War is hell.” William Tecumseh Sherman

If war is hell, does it follow that a soldier’s soul is damned for eternity?

While surprisingly not including an entry for guilt, the 1914 edition of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, published on the fateful first year of the Great War, grants, of course, ample space to the matter of sin.

Aside from the more obvious (to a Catholic, at least) distinctions between mortal and venial sin, the philosophical argument around free will and full conscience of the sinful act includes many details and even some apparently troubling passages, such as

the following one, as regards the difference between material (objective) and formal (subjective) sin:

“a person who takes the property of another while believing it to be his own commits a material sin; but the sin would be formal if he took the property in the belief that it belonged to another, whether his belief were correct or not.”

I find this passage particularly problematic vis-à-vis my interest in war as a setting for my novels. Although its learned author does not state that formal sin is less grave than material sin, surely for a layperson the distinction sounds like hairsplitting between willful and more or less unwitting transgression.

To my admittedly scarce knowledge of theological matters, it also runs the risk of casting a dangerous light on trespasses against persons or things, if we commit them in the belief that they are permissible inasmuch as the persons or things in question belong to us. Where does such a distinction leave the Nazis' claim that they had a right to secure “Living Space” for Germany in Eastern Europe (Lebensraum)? And what about their aberrant faith in the absolute necessity of privileging their “race” and culture?

My protagonist, Martin Bora, an ethically-minded German serving in World War II, observes at one point, “I will not discuss theology with my betters.” But at least he is a philosophy major who studied canon law and attended Heidegger's lessons. It was Heidegger, in *Being and Time* who said, “Wanting to have a conscience becomes readiness for anguish.”

Raised as a Catholic — and a German Catholic at that — no revanchism, no Jazz Age sexual liberation, no trust in final victory can change Bora's moral essence. For him, the challenge is not to contravene his ethical standards while excelling in his role as an officer in the field. For me, the question of helping him to save his soul is perhaps

more abstract, but just as personal. The underlying problem for this cavalry officer engaged in counterespionage and sleuthing is that he grows up in the aftermath of the Great War, and serves — albeit with many reservations — in the army of the Third Reich. His boyhood referents are conservative tradition, patriotism, and family. And yet, throughout the series — ten novels plus the one in progress — Bora trespasses against every one of his referents for the higher good. From a writer's point of view, it continues to be important that his progression (not a change of heart, but the refinement of his doubts) be fully believable, organic, as it were, to his strict but enlightened upbringing and his sensitivity. In *Tin Sky*, the moral dilemma becomes acute:

Every day, whatever Bora did, Stalingrad was there, like a droning undersong. At night, he removed Stalingrad. He did not allow anguish to cross the space, at times physically reduced, around himself. In that island, sleep came heavy, brutal, like a seal that made his mind impermeable to memory. At times it occurred to him that criminals lead similar lives, willfully depriving themselves of entire portions of their experience, a self-mutilation necessary to keep going. He had no indulgence toward himself, not ever. I know myself and treat myself accordingly, he reasoned. I know who I am, the choices I made. And he never went further in that scrutiny. He hadn't gone to confession in nearly two years. He mechanically attended field Mass whenever possible, but in Russia even praying had become mechanical, a question of formulae. In Stalingrad he had not prayed, not even when the situation was that of one who has already begun sinking into the abyss. Perhaps because he feared that the Christian's last powerful hope, that God will listen, would be disappointed. Perhaps because God had nothing to do with Stalingrad. His lucidity, the lucidity von Salomon envied in him, was polished like a mirror (or a sheet of ice), Bora did not allow the smallest speck of dust to rest on it. It was an extreme process of scouring that removed with acid all blemishes and flaws.

In its entry for war, while recommending moderation and condemning “intrinsically immoral” acts such as the slaughter of the innocent, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* explains that “Catholic philosophy...concedes to the State the full natural right of war ... defensive ... offensive ... or punitive, in the infliction of punishment for evil done against itself.” It’s no surprise, then, that a young aristocrat from Luther’s own Saxony, descendant from Luther’s wife Katharina von Bora and twenty years old when National Socialism comes to power, should follow the military career more or less expected of his social class.

The real question is not so much war or soldiering. It concerns the peculiar nature of total war, as waged between 1939 and 1945, and its absolute aberrations: the Holocaust; the slaughter of over twenty million Russians; carpet bombing; the use of atomic weapons against civilians. From the beginning, in order to illustrate the natural development of Bora’s character, it has been necessary to present the variety of approaches to dictatorship and war embodied by his friends and foes, compatriots and adversaries, from the Gestapo death squads to Soviet political commissars, from self-serving fascist bureaucrats to profiteers, willing executioners and cowards, conspirators against Hitler, common criminals and guiltless victims.

In 1937, with Bora as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War (*The Horseman’s Song*), we are still a year away from the Night of Broken Glass and there seems to be still room for decency; yet two years later, in *Master of One Hundred Bones*, the ethnic cleansing practices by Germany’s Japanese allies give a hint of evil things to come. In *Lumen*, set in Poland, the mask has fallen off the face of Nazi warfare, and Bora has to take a first perilous step toward dissension. *The Road to Ithaca*, set in 1941 Greece, raises the ante for the protagonist, caught between excesses committed by both sides. The alienated post-Stalingrad Ukraine of *Tin Sky* shows Bora in the eye of the storm, when most war crimes have already been committed. The disappearance of every moral compass (and further need for active resistance on Bora’s part) follow in the first three novels of the “Italian Tetralogy,” *Liar Moon*, *A Dark Song of Blood*,

The Dead in the Square. In *The Venus of Salò*, all would appear lost, physically and morally, for Bora and for Germany.

The series is ongoing, and the novel in progress (*The Little Fires*) deals with blindness and sight in all their acceptations, the ethical one included, as in John Newton's "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost, but now I'm found / Was blind, but now I see ..."

So, how does Bora strive to save his soul? Mostly by saving the lives of others, whether it involves disobeying criminal orders, denouncing war crimes, or materially helping the innocent to escape death. All this he manages to pull off thanks to an impeccable war record and his success as an investigator, remaining nonetheless a loyal soldier, excellent commander, and anything but politically correct.



Albrecht Dürer's 'The Knight Death and the Devil.'

One image for all: Albrecht Dürer's 1513 woodcut, "Knight, Death and the Devil" shows a stern, impassive armor-bearing rider advancing across a desolate land, in the uncomfortable company of an obscene fiend and a skeleton carrying an hourglass. Jorge Luis Borges believed it illustrates a familiar passage from Psalm 23, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." I tend to agree with

the great Argentinean author. Martin Bora, born exactly four hundred years after Dürer's work, is for me much like the knight portrayed in such dangerous physical and spiritual circumstances.

All in all, given that war is their subject matter, it is not accidental if my Bora novels, intended first and foremost to provide reading entertainment, also strive to portray in a comprehensive, multi-layered fashion, a historical time so significant for the genesis of the world we live in. If today we do have international laws against the violation of human rights, it is partly — and paradoxically — as a consequence of the atrocious violations of those very rights in World War II.

I am not certain whether Meister Eckhart, the mystic thinker, meant something similar when he wrote in his *Spiritual Instructions*, “Know that the inclination toward sin is always of great advantage and profit for the righteous man.” To be sure, there is no real virtue without temptation, no true sense of evil without an exposure to evil, and no salvation (for Martin Bora or anyone else) without the risk of losing one's soul.