



## A riddle to be solved in Stalingrad's hell

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A riddle to be solved in Stalingrad's hell – Books – A book a day

(ANSA) – ROME, NOV 15 – BEN PASTOR, THE SYNAGOGUE OF THE GYPSIES (translation by Luigi Sanvito, Sellerio publisher, 663 pages, euro 17)

Two famous Romanian scientists disappear in the heart of the steppe, in August 1942, while the troops of 'Axis march towards Stalingrad. The task of finding them is entrusted to an officer engaged on the front but also belonging to the Abwehr, the German military counter-espionage: it is Martin Bora, protagonist of a successful series of novels by the writer Ben Pastor, born Maria Verbena Volpi, born in Italy and then became a professor of social sciences in American universities.

What presented itself as a simple search operation soon became a complex murder investigation, which also involves the armies of Italy and Romania in an intertwining of national and private interests, hidden truths and double-crosses. Martin meets a major from Friuli, Amerigo Galvani, who will help him in the investigation and with whom he will establish a human bond destined to continue even when the fate of the war will separate their departments. Meanwhile, the advance towards Stalingrad continues, but despite the growing difficulties Martin receives pressure from General Paulus to continue to deal with the case. At least until the battle for the taking of the city begins, destined to turn into apocalyptic carnage, in which over a million human beings will end up dead, missing or imprisoned.

Ben Pastor's novels cross genres, intertwining 'detective' and historical fiction with meticulous documentation. In this twelfth adventure of Bora the reconstruction of the battle becomes central, narrated above all from the human point of view. The author entrusts to the voice of her protagonist a story in which, in the initial exhilarating euphoria of the conquest, horror and fear are gradually replaced by an increasingly devastating urban guerrilla. Bora confides in his diary: "The smell of burning buildings, brick dust, liquefied rubber comes at night. During the day it feels like hell." A hell that unites beyond the uniforms: "At a certain point all of us, Russians and Germans, found ourselves running to save our skin, you forget that you are there to kill each other". The invaders are unable to break the Russian resistance, the advance stops among the destroyed buildings and snipers stationed everywhere. Food is scarce, the winter advances with temperatures from -30, the fear of

being “a boat without a rudder and adrift” creeps in among the Germans, writes Bora, an army “led by sleepwalkers, the first of which in Berlin “. On cold nights, Martin reads Leopardi, remembers his father as an orchestra conductor who was acclaimed in Tsarist Russia, writes passionate letters to his distant wife. Belonging to a noble family, raised in a military academy, he could not fail to love his country and the army by tradition and education; but he is a tormented man, torn between an oath of allegiance to the flag and a profound sense of rebellion in the face of the atrocities of Nazism and war. “Human bestiality loves uniforms”, he wrote at the height of the umpteenth massacre in the snow of Stalingrad. The Russians retake the city and the Germans remain trapped. Escape now seems impossible but Martin, leading the few men left alive, manages to travel 400 kilometers behind enemy lines in a nightmare odyssey. Despite intense traumas destined to leave indelible marks, he never stops thinking about the case of the Romanians and its ramifications in the hierarchies of power.

Bora will arrive at the solution after a few months from the start of the investigation, in a painful and surprising way. The pages of the confrontation with the murderer are particularly intense as is the subsequent rewriting of a letter, which once again shows the more deeply human and chivalrous side of the officer-detective. In the background there is the elusive image of the Synagogue of the Gypsies, a place (remember? Prophecy?) Dreamed of several times by Martin and whose meaning will be revealed only at the end of a book in which, as always in the pages of Ben Pastor, the ethical and moral questions cast the light of man on the shadows of history.

The Italian-American author writes in English: her prose, in the vivid translation by Luigi Sanvito, masterfully evokes environments and psychologies, from the hallucinatory atmospheres of the siege to the alienating sense of an existence conducted on the edge of death, while guiding it of superiors becomes evanescent, incapable or cowardly. An accurate historical – and emotional – reconstruction, never rhetorical, in what is perhaps his most majestic novel.

Ben Pastor, always in search of new frontiers to explore, here exhibits all her talents as a narrator, building a literary frame of captivating power around the mystery.