

The Painting by Lisa Barr

After more than 60 years, a portrait attributed to an Expressionist artist killed by the Nazis is back in the hands of its rightful owner. But did the person who signed the canvas—valued at \$100 million—really paint it?

Everyone was watching my reaction to the painting. The museum officials, the politicians, the art connoisseurs, the media and the lawyers. I wanted to shout out that my sister, Ava, had been far more beautiful than her image, and that no one in the gallery could possibly understand the painting's true meaning. I felt the resentment penetrating against my back, as those around me demanded answers. But I refused to display any sign of emotion.

Instead, I continued to stare at the painting. It had been so long since we had been together. Oddly, I thought, my memory after so many years had never felt sharper. It was as though the canvas and I had never been apart.

Clenching my fists to the sides of my dress, I willed them to stay put or I would surely reach out and touch the painting, just to experience again the thick texture of color that I had once known so well: the green spark in Ava's eyes, the pale pink of her mouth, the streaks of rose against her high cheekbones, the raven highlights igniting her ebony hair.

Oh, Ava, if only I could jump inside the canvas and be with you once again. I absorbed Ava's youth, its permanence, and for a moment, I allowed myself to remember my own. We were twins after all. Ava was regarded as a great beauty, and I, attractive enough, was considered the talent. What seemed to others as an unfair distribution had never mattered to us. We always perceived ourselves as two parts of a whole. I was the artist, she, the art.

I finally tore away from the painting and glanced briefly at the crowd. The appraisers both in America and in Germany had all agreed that the "Portrait of Ava" by the famous dead Expressionist artist Milo Becker was worth well over \$100 million. As one German curator commented, Ava was a modern day Mona Lisa—those mysterious eyes, that omnipotent smile—a shame that his government had to give her up. And, to a Jew, which he did not say, but I knew exactly what he was thinking.

After more than six decades in captivity, the Germans finally set the painting free.

But only at night, in my dreams, have I been truly free of old wounds. In the grainy vignettes of my mind I was once again the promising young painter studying under the great Milo Becker, and Ava was his muse.

I am now over ninety, so close to death that I could practically touch her airy, blackened hand. My life should be coming to a gentle closure. Instead, my story—Ava's story—is

being flashed like neon lights across the news. My once quiet existence has turned into a scream: the foul sounds of lawyers and appraisers, liars and leeches, echoing through international courtrooms, demanding justice, restitution. Everyone thought—hoped—I would die before reclaiming my sister’s famous image. But I was determined to live long enough to see that Ava was back where she belongs.

I turned to the painting and held the steady gaze of my sister, silently asking her the same question that I have pondered often into the dead of night: *Where did you go, Ava? Where did you go?*

I gazed across the spans of the Grönwald Forest alongside Milo Becker’s country house. It was thick with birch trees and wild flowers, unscathed as far as the eye could see. I inhaled the fresh air as though it were my last breath. The mid-morning sun warmed my back. I felt more relaxed than I had in months. I knew it was all an illusion, but for the moment, I did not care.

I loved this place. It helped me forget the Nazis. Here, inside Becker’s secluded world, I could pretend that I was not a woman or a Jew, but an artist free to paint.

In the distance I heard Becker’s voice, then spotted him leaning against a tree, singing a German folk song. I eyed the direction of the light as it angled through the trees behind him. My hands tingled as the tepid breeze rustled the branches and moved over me, running down the length of my arms, encouraging me to create. Nature demanded to be painted.

Becker crept up behind me. His big hair shadowed my canvas like a lunar eclipse. His breath landed thickly against my neck, but he remained disturbingly silent as I painted. I tried to ignore him.

Finally, after a wordless hour, Becker grabbed my shoulders and embraced me. My whole body relaxed inside his arms. I knew I was on the right track.

Becker had insisted that we paint outdoors, even through the winter. He encouraged me to be as unconfined as the woods surrounding us—to forget everything, especially now. Hitler’s rise to power, he would say, had no place in the forest. Here I was safe. *Forget politics, Emma. Concentrate on your trees. They should not look like trees but feel like trees. Do not paint your sister, Emma, but paint how your sister feels standing there next to the trees.*

I stared at the branches, which were filled with the colors of the wind moving around them;

shimmering strands of cool, breezy blue sharing space with the spiritual warmth of red and gold. I then focused on Ava, who waved and then stuck out her tongue. We both laughed hard. If only I could paint that laugh. It was by far her most beautiful feature, the one that you could feel to the depths of your soul.

My sister had suddenly become serious, frozen in her pose, like a still life. She stopped smiling and began staring without blinking. *What was she thinking? About our parents? About our privileged life that was slowly, methodically, being stolen from us? Or was she thinking of Milo Becker, about secretly bedding him later that night.* He was my father's closest friend, at least thirty years Ava's senior.

Don't think, I told myself. Just feel. Ignore the intensity of Ava's face and focus instead on the thick sheath wrapped around her body like a toga. The early afternoon wind billowed through the loose material and clung to her generous curves. I studied the determined swing of the trees behind her. The stalwart trunks branched out like attentive guardsmen. I stared at Ava until she lost all form and merged into nature, becoming bold strokes of color.

It was much later that evening, long after Ava had retired to bed, that I finally saw my painting in all its glory. Becker had brought the canvas into his library, where I was curled up reading a book. In one hand he held the painting, in the other, a bottle of Bordeaux.

"It is simply brilliant, Emma," he said proudly, handing me a glass of wine.

I took the wine greedily. I had been drinking quite a lot lately.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Too brilliant, I'm afraid. You have surpassed what I can teach you." He removed the book from my grasp and gently placed it on the wooden table in front of me. "Barely twenty-one with the hands of a magician. I want you to look at the painting, Emma. Really look at it."

I smiled slightly, observing Ava's ethereal beauty against the trees. The colors, the sky, even the arid breeze blowing through her hair seemed to jump off the canvas. I glanced at my slim hands, at the light protrusion of veins covered by olive skin. Becker was right. This was not an ordinary painting.

Becker placed his wine glass on the table and walked over to his desk in the corner of the room. He began shuffling papers. His voice became shaky.

"Yesterday they fired the director of the Nationalgalerie. Last week, five more galleries in Berlin were shut down. All colleagues, Emma, all friends. Each day it gets closer. It is only a matter of time before those bastards come after me."

“But you are Milo Becker,” I said, turning away from the painting. “A national treasure. Untouchable.”

“No one is untouchable.” His fist slammed against the desk, then he dropped his head into his hands. When he looked up, his eyes were baggy and tired. “You must leave Berlin, Emma. I have friends in Paris. You will stay with them until things calm down here. I spoke to your father...”

“No, Milo, I am not leaving.” I walked over to him and stood before the desk.

Becker shook his head stubbornly. I knew that look. There was no changing his mind. “People are talking about you.” He eyed the painting as one would a newborn. “You have a gift. They will come after you. They hate the modernists even more than the Jews. but you, my friend, have the great misfortune of being both.”

Becker came around the desk. He reached for my hands and cupped them inside his warm ones. “And worse, you are rich. Richer than any member of the Reich. Not to mention your father was a huge supporter of the Weimar Republic. You have every strike against you, Emma.”

He paused, shaking his head.

He released my hands and walked over to the painting. His back faced me. “You are leaving the country in two days.” His tone was unyielding. “It has all been arranged with your father. You will go from here.”

“And Ava?” I cried out, not believing that I had no control over my own life. “What about Ava?”

Becker turned to me but averted his eyes. He knew that I knew about their relationship, but we never discussed it. “She will stay here for now. Until I can secure her passage as well.”

I shook my head and stood my ground. “I am not leaving without my sister.” Becker silently watched me.

“Did you hear me, Milo? I will not paint even a single stroke until you send her to me,” I said defiantly.

“Emma, please. You have no choice. Read the writing on the wall. I am saving your life, don’t you see?”

Yes, but at what price?

I pointed to the painting. I, too, could be stubborn. "I will go to Paris only on the condition that you sign my canvas as a guarantee that you will send Ava to me within the month, no matter what."

He stepped back from the painting as though it were contaminated. "I am not going to sign your painting."

"Sign my painting," I demanded, "and then I will leave Berlin."

"Never." He then shook his head angrily. "It is not my masterpiece. It is yours."

"Yes, but it is my sister on the canvas," I argued. "I want her with me. The painting will be our contract. If you sign it, then I will know your word is good."

He stared at me powerlessly, and I knew that he would do as I asked.

I left the room, returning with a jar of black paint and a slim brush. I dipped the brush deep into the black and then handed it to him. He reluctantly signed. I watched the hesitant swirl of each letter. When he was finished, he dropped the brush to the floor and turned away. His honor was at stake. He turned slowly, tears glistening on his cheek.

It was May 4, 1937, one year and two days after I had left Germany for Paris, one year and four days since I had painted the "Portrait of Ava." My sister and my painting were still trapped in Berlin. Things had gone from bad to worse. Within one month of my departure, the Reich had confiscated my family's estate and froze my father's assets. They refused to let my sister leave the country, no matter the bribes they were offered by my father's friends. The Nazis would happily take the money, then decline Ava's visa, always sighting some bureaucratic problem. It was a power play; a perverse game of sorts.

Life in Germany had become hell for Modern artists. Hitler, a third-rate classical artist himself, ordered the Reich to shut down every Modern art institution in the country and was engaged in a witch-hunt against those who did not obey the party line. Paintings, sculptures and drawings were confiscated, many destroyed. Art-supply stores were burnt down if they sold to Modern artists.

But Milo Becker refused to obey the rule. One night, he called for an emergency meeting of

Expressionists to be held at his old friend Lucas Wolf's gallery in Berlin, which remained open because Wolf had agreed to the government's demands to sell only Nazi-approved artwork. That was Wolf's cover. By night, Wolf and Becker were busy smuggling Modern art out of the country.

The meeting was packed with fugitive artists, those who had once been celebrated but were now stripped of their glory and forbidden to paint.

Milo Becker stood in the center of the gallery, eyeing each person in the room carefully. For a moment, he held Ava's gaze as he spoke slowly. "So, my friends, this is all we have left of our movement. The Nazis have taken everything from us except our souls, our imagination and our courage to defy them." Becker made an expansive sweep of the room, as if invoking a landscape. "We are artists, not warriors. The only laws we know are those of nature. But now we are left with no choice. We have to fight back and protect our art before those savages destroy everything."

He pointed to the stacks of canvases in the corner of the room. "We do not know if we are going to live or die, but those paintings will survive. They are being smuggled out tonight."

Tears filled his eyes.

And then, as if on cue, the gallery doors were flung open. At least a dozen Gestapo officers stood in the doorway. They quickly scattered throughout the room. Tables were overturned, chairs hurled through the air. The police clubbed anyone in their way. There was no resistance. Over the chaos, Becker's name was shouted, and then an eerie silence washed over the crowded gallery.

The captain of the police aimed his gun at the group of artists. "I want Milo Becker."

But no one moved. The captain then fired shots into the air until one man stepped toward him.

"I am Milo Becker." The artists parted reluctantly as their leader made his way forward.

"I am afraid, Herr Becker, your little party is over," the captain said.

"There was never any party," Becker said carefully. "Just a gathering of friends."

The captain laughed hard. "Just so you know, one of your so-called friends turned you in to save their own pathetic artwork, which we destroyed anyway."

Becker's focus never veered from the captain. His firm voice belied his fear as he pointed at his colleagues. "Leave them alone. Take me."

The captain nodded at two guards, who handcuffed Becker.

"No!" Ava screamed from the back of the room. She ran toward Becker, who tried to signal her to stay away. But she stood in front of him defiantly, trying to block the police from taking her lover. The Gestapo pushed her roughly to the floor, and then one of them noticed the painting in the corner of the room.

"Hey, look," he shouted. "That girl is his model."

The captain walked toward the painting, tilted his head and studied it. When he turned, he met Becker's panicked expression. "Well, then take the bitch, too."

And then they were gone. *My sister. My mentor. My painting.*

Two months later, my father, who had been hiding at a friend's chalet in Austria, wrote to me that he had heard from our former butler, Martin, that the "Portrait of Ava" was hanging in an exhibit in Munich. He wrote that Martin had seen the painting with his own eyes. Martin was a good man, loyal to the end. A few years later, when the Nazis had convicted him of treason and sent him to Auschwitz, he never revealed where my parents were hiding.

In his letter to my father, Martin wrote that the traveling exhibit called *Entartete Kunst*, Degenerate Art, was being used as a tool to showcase Modern art as toxic to the German race. When he heard that the "Portrait of Ava" was there on display, Martin immediately headed to Munich.

When he arrived at the exhibit, Martin said he was surprised to see that the line of spectators nearly wrapped around the gray, rundown building.

There were ten rooms crammed with six hundred and fifty pieces of artwork confiscated from Germany's great museums. He had recognized many of the paintings because the artists were, like Milo Becker, close friends of my father. Martin had written that he finally found the painting in what was called the Jew Room, because Milo Becker's grandmother had been half-Jewish. The painting was hung sloppily, frameless, in the corner of the room.

Finally, Martin wrote that he could not lie to my father. He had heard that Ava and Milo Becker had been found hanging from the rafters in Becker's studio. The Nazis called it suicide. No one ever saw the bodies.

It was 1939, a sun-drenched day in June. My close friend Louise Moreau, a prominent Parisian art dealer, had been invited to an auction being held in Lucerne, Switzerland. At first, she had refused to go, saying that it would ruin her reputation to be there. She attended only because I begged her to go. It was rumored that the painting was there.

It was nearly 3:00. At any moment the auction would begin. From Louise's corner seat in the opulent salon of the Grand Hotel National, she glimpsed serene Lake Lucerne through the large arched window. She knew, as did all three hundred and fifty guests, that the surroundings were a façade. There was nothing tranquil about what was about to take place.

Louise had said she recognized many of the other art dealers milling about. Some had been her colleagues, most competitors. That day, they were representing clients who wished to remain anonymous in purchasing valuable art.

The "Portrait of Ava" was indeed among the important works on the auction block. Everyone in the room knew exactly what they were bidding on and knew exactly where the money was going. The stolen art would be sold to benefit the Reich.

Louise was determined to record everything she saw for me, particularly the names and descriptions of those bidding on my painting.

At approximately 6:15, the auctioneer stood, his voice sharp and clear as he announced, "Portrait of Ava' by the German artist Milo Becker."

Bidding cards were being raised swiftly into the air before the auctioneer had even finished describing the artwork.

Louise counted ten bidders. She took notes, as I had instructed her, on everyone who raised his or her hand.

"I have an order bid of 142,000 francs. The buyer prefers to remain anonymous."

The auctioneer cleared his throat uncomfortably as he announced the sale. "The painting is sold."

That was the last I saw or heard of the painting. Ava, I thought, had slipped away for good. It was then that I put away my brushes.

Nearly six decades later, Ava returned to me. Mr. and Mrs. Anonymous, upon their deaths, had bequeathed the “Portrait of Ava” to the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. And now, after seven years of fierce courtroom battles, I had won the right to take Ava home.

I gazed at the painting, not believing that it was my sister before me. *Where have you been?* I demanded. We could always read each others’ minds, but her beautiful green eyes were illusive and sad. Her faded pink lips quivered beneath the paint. She had seen too much. I glanced around me. Everyone was still gauging my reaction, waiting for me to do something. So I did the unthinkable. I reached out and touched the painting. I heard the gasps around me.

Someone grabbed my arm, bringing it gently to my side. I looked away from Ava and into the eyes of my granddaughter Julia. I smiled at her and softly whispered her name.

“Oma,” she said, clutching both of my hands. “It is now time to go. We have to catch a flight. The painting will be back with us in California at the end of the week.”

I nodded, but my feet were planted. I was too scared to leave the painting. Too afraid Ava would disappear once again.

“Emma.” A young man called out to me. I turned away from Julia. The voice belonged to one of my many lawyers. They all looked the same, sounded the same.

“There is a man outside the museum,” he explained. “An important one. He flew all this way to talk to you. He is waiting in a limousine. He wants to buy the painting.”

I laughed, shaking my head.

“He is a big movie producer. A Jew, who founded a museum in New York to preserve and honor recovered paintings stolen by the Nazis.”

“Leave her alone, Nathan,” my granddaughter scolded.

“But he offered \$130 million, Julia,” he argued. “It is insane, unheard of. We should meet with him.”

My free hand clenched. If I had strength and age on my side, I would have hit him. “Ava is not for sale,” I snapped.

“But your bills, the taxes.”

“You mean your bill,” Julia countered. “Ava is Milo Becker’s masterpiece, his last known painting. It belongs to my grandmother. Now please, just go. Leave us alone.”

My granddaughter, who had a head for business and who was as beautiful as Ava and as stubborn as me, led me out a side door, ignoring the media clamoring behind us.

I turned to her, tears of gratitude rolling down my face. Julia tenderly wiped my cheek. “Come, Oma, the day has been too long. The journey too tiring for you.”

No, I thought, my life has been too long, and it is Ava who was tired from journeying.

“Yes, Julia.” I held her close, my granddaughter. “Let’s just go home.”

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