

DANIEL SPECK

## **Bella Germania**

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Translated by Anne Stokes

**A captivating family saga that moves between Munich, Milan and the beauty of the volcanic islands of Sicily**

Munich 2014: Julia, a young fashion designer, is about to have the great breakthrough she's always dreamed of when a stranger shows up claiming to be her grandfather. As her whole life starts to unravel, Julia has to confront the truth about the alleged death of her Italian father who she hardly remembers, and decide how much she wants to know. Who is this elegant woman in the photo who looks exactly like her? And why will no one tell her how she died? Getting to know her Italian family, she starts piecing together a heartbreaking story of love and loss that will cast its shadows for generations to come.

**Daniel Speck** is a successful scriptwriter and lecturer at various film academies in Germany and Italy. He studied cinema history in Munich and Rome and wrote the scripts for the comedy hits *Maria, ihm schmeckt's nicht* and *Antonio im Wunderland* by Jan Weiler. He received the Grimme Award for *Meine verrückte türkische Hochzeit*. *Bella Germania* is his first novel.

# 1

## JULIA

He said he was my grandfather and that if I let him tell me his story, I'd believe him. He asked me to listen to him so urgently it was as though his life depended on it. And after he told me the story, I understood that in actual fact it was *my* life that depended on it.

But I didn't know that when he suddenly appeared in front of me, a handsome old man, a stranger, who looked at me as if he'd always known me. It was spring, I was in Milan, and he roused me from a dream – only the dream was the reality that I had considered to be my life up to then.

[...]

## 2

[Julia makes her debut show at the Milano Fashion Week and suddenly collapses ...]

When I opened my eyes again, I felt sweat and cold night air on my forehead. Someone had wrenched the window open. I was lying in the make-up room, on the cold floor under the makeup mirror, amongst chairs, clothes rails and piles of clothes. The models were talking over one another nervously. One of them was holding my leg up. Robin was missing. A young paramedic was speaking in Italian, trying to calm the models down. He injected something into my arm, and gradually my hearing came back. The worried voices, thumping music from next door and a motor scooter under the open window. The paramedic helped me onto one of the chairs.

My pale face in the make-up mirror. A stranger. I saw him for the first time, behind me. He came through the door, an old man among the young models. Tall, slim and energetic; he was out of place here with his elegant suit, cravat and hat. No one knew him, but he edged his way through to me as if he knew me. I was struck by his eyes. Clear, blue and alert. He had to be a German. Everyone in the room no doubt believed that he was with someone else. That's the fashion scene for you. There's always some stranger or other milling about, you never know everybody's name, and everyone's wary of asking because it could be someone important.

‘How are you?’ he asked me. His voice seemed too concerned for a stranger.

‘Okay.’

He handed me a glass of water. I gulped it down hastily and ran my fingers through my dishevelled hair, grateful for the oxygen that was streaming in through the window. He sat down on the chair next to me. At first I thought he was one of the judges, but he seemed too respectable for that. You can sense if someone works in the industry. There was something touching in the way he was looking at me. He was animated, agitated, as though he'd known me for a long time. But I hadn't the slightest idea who he was. In the fluorescent light of the makeup mirror I wasn't able to gauge his age. He had to be around eighty.

‘Julia,’ he said softly.

‘Do we know each other?’ I replied, bewildered by his unflinching gaze. He raised his eyebrows.

‘Congratulations on the collection.’ His voice sounded incredibly young, not without authority but at the same time peculiarly fragile.

‘Thanks.’

He cleared his throat. ‘I’m from Munich, too. I came down here after you to see your show.’ He said ‘show’ as though it had nothing to do with fashion but instead a PowerPoint slide show. ‘I’m Vincent... Vincent Schlewitz.’

He was waiting to gauge the effect his name would have on me. But it meant nothing. The paramedic interrupted us in Italian. Since I didn’t understand a word, Vincent translated: I was to pull up my sleeve, since the paramedic needed to take my blood pressure. And did I really not want to see a doctor. I shook my head. ‘Slight dizziness, that was all,’ I replied, saying nothing about the mix of coffee, adrenalin and other substances in my blood. I felt uncomfortable being watched by everyone while the paramedic inflated the cuff around my thin upper arm. To detract attention from myself rather than out of any curiosity, I asked the stranger: ‘And which label are you with?’

He weighed his words before answering. ‘It may surprise you but I’m here in a personal capacity. When you feel better again and if you have a few minutes to talk in private... ‘

He was starting to give me the creeps. As if he could read my thoughts, he added: ‘Don’t think... I’m not some crazed fan. I just wanted to... get to know you.’ He looked at me oddly, as though he were looking through me at someone else.

‘Now’s not a good time, sorry.’

He didn’t let himself be swayed. ‘It might seem strange to you right now, but... We’re related. Your father...’ He hesitated upon seeing my reaction. ‘... is my son. I’m... your grandfather.’

A bad joke. Impossible. A nutcase. These thoughts raced through my head. I must have looked so astonished that he became formal again.

‘Your father’s Vincenzo, is he not?’

Vincenzo. I hadn’t heard the name for years. For decades in fact. Where the hell did he know him from? No one apart from my mother knew my father’s name. The paramedic removed the inflatable cuff, irritated, and said something to the man. If my blood pressure had just been in the cellar, it must now have shot through the roof. I wanted to jump up but felt paralysed.

I’d seen Vincenzo only once in my life. Vincenzo Marconi, an Italian, son of a migrant worker from Sicily. My mother hadn’t told me much more than that. And the little that she knew about him beyond this wasn’t very flattering. This stranger who was claiming to be his father was clearly a German. It couldn’t be true.

‘I think you’re mistaking me for someone else,’ I mumbled, trying to get up. I wanted out of here. But I felt dizzy standing up. The paramedic held me by the arm.

*‘Piano, signora, piano.’* He intimated to the man that he should leave me in peace now. But he didn’t pay any heed.

‘Please. It’s really important.’

He pulled his business card out of his sports jacket and handed it to me.

‘I live in Munich, too. I’ll have to explain things to you. This is for you. That’s...’ He pulled an old photo out of his jacket, hesitating briefly as though he wanted to be sure that I was prepared for this moment. Then he handed it to me.

It was from another era. Black-and-white and tattered, from the fifties judging from the clothes. A young couple in front of a motorcycle, Milan Cathedral in the background. He’s holding her hand, they’re both a little shy, but uninhibited, radiant with happiness. The man is somewhat older than the woman. He’s wearing a simple summer suit in the straight, somewhat conservative cut of the fifties, and he’s well-built and tall, with bright eyes burning with wit and intelligence. His smile exudes courage and confidence. Something boyish, innocent surrounds him. I recognised him even though the photograph was sixty years old.

‘That’s me in 1954 in Milan. And that’s Giulietta. Your grandmother.’

He pointed at the woman in the photo. A pretty Italian woman in her early twenties with short, black hair, in a summer suit and a little hat. She was like me. Not that she looked

like to me in the least, no. It was, rather, as though I was looking straight at my own reflection. I was taken aback. She was younger than I am now, but she had my slight build, my winged eyebrows, that adventurous and somewhat dreamy expression that I recognised from photos of me, the same dark eyes and the ironic line around the mouth. She seemed to be bursting with energy, and yet there was something sad and melancholy in her large eyes. What I saw wasn't a stranger but an echo of my own soul from a bygone era. In this photo I saw myself as a woman in another time, in different clothes, next to a strange man. So incredibly vivid, so familiar and mysterious that it made me speechless.

'Wait a minute, that can't be. My father was an Italian, but you're a German, are you not?'

He looked at me with some uncertainty.

'What did he tell you about me then?'

I turned away so the others couldn't hear me.

'Nothing. He's of no concern to me.'

The sudden edge to my voice unsettled him.

'But...?'

'He's dead. Sorry, you must be mistaking me for someone else.'

'Dead?' he asked, shocked. 'When did he die?'

'When I was little.'

'Who says so?'

'My mother.'

'But that's not true. He's alive.'

I stared at him, dazed. He seemed to be quite certain.

'No.'

'Yes, he is. I know. He lives in Italy.'

[...]

## 6

### VINCENT, Summer 1954

[...]

When he reached Milan, the sun was already low in the sky, and rain clouds were gathering. The colours he'd absorbed along the way disappeared in the greyness of the urban jungle. Endless faceless suburbs, fascist high-rises, six-, ten- and twenty-storey office blocks, trendy shops and futuristic exhibition halls, cathedrals of modernity; this Milan wasn't the Bella Italia of Rudolf Schuricke's famous song 'Fisherman of Capri'. No red sun sank into the sea here, instead hundreds of motorbikes roared along the eight-lane boulevards. The metropolis pulsed to the beat of the stock exchange, the banks and factories. Vincent looked on his old street map for the address of his guest house in the city centre. He lost his way in the traffic, when streetlamps and shop windows shone at dusk, and thought: My God, how small Munich is, how fusty is Germany!

Suddenly he was standing on the largest square he'd ever seen. The people were dwarfed by the enormous façade of the cathedral with its infinitely fine lines, and right next to it, no less sublime, the portal to the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele with its elegant fashion stores beneath its glass dome. The windows of the shopping arcades shone brightly in perfect symmetry. Handsome waiters in black suits served aperitifs to beautifully set tables. On the roofs, gigantic neon signs lit up the night: Cinzano, Campari, Coca-Cola. This feast of architectural perfection and sophisticated elegance gave the lie to what his colleagues, veterans of the Africa Corps, had said about the alleged backwardness, lack of discipline and lousy morale of the Italians. Families ambled across the piazza, the men in fine dark suits, the women in evening gowns and coats, with stylish hats and stoles around their shoulders. Their sense of style was natural and understated in equal measure, free from ostentation or fashion mistakes, an unbroken tradition that combined nonchalantly with the splendour of modernity. A bearing that had died out in post-war Germany, if it had ever existed.

It started to rain. The locals put up their umbrellas and began to walk faster. Vincent stood next to his motorcycle, the only person without a broly, a foreigner among natives who were hurrying to their flats and restaurants... and suddenly he remembered that today was his birthday. A day he'd stopped celebrating a long time ago – who would he have celebrated it with? He no longer had anyone. But instead of sadness he was filled with sheer happiness at simply being alive. The war was over, a new Europe was emerging from the ruins, and he was accountable to no one. The world was full of possibilities. He drew in the fresh, humid air. He was only twenty-four years old, free and determined to make something of this life.

## 7

[...]

Vincent shook hands with one person after another as he made his way through the line of engineers who had mustered in suits and ties in front of the Iso factory floor to welcome the emissary from Germany. Renzo Rivolta, Iso's owner, introduced him to each of his men in turn:

*'Buongiorno, piacere, gutten Tack!'*

One of them could even speak a few words of German; he'd fought under Rommel in the desert. Renzo Rivolta was an aristocrat and an old-school employer. He wore a grey pinstriped suit, a green dress handkerchief, and gleaming shoes. A dynamic and charismatic man. You felt immediately that he viewed the firm as a family and his men as family members. A strict but benevolent *padrone*.

The engineers, who were all older than Vincent, were polite enough to hide their astonishment at the fact that the big German company had only sent a twenty-four-year-old whippersnapper. And one who didn't speak a word of Italian to boot. Vincent had hardly slept in the stuffy room in his little guest house. He was quite wound up. The licensing agreement was of great importance to his company, but also for Iso; BMW desperately needed a compact car, and Iso urgently needed a hit. Sales of BMW's Isetta were sluggish in Italy – it was functional but it wasn't handsome. And just as the Germans think that only practical things are good, the Italians believe that anything that's any good has to be beautiful. Even Iso's production hall in Bresso, a suburb of Milan, was a paradigm of modern

architecture, with its broad vaulted ceilings and bright windows. While the Italians talked insistently to Vincent, politely ignoring the fact that he didn't understand a word of what they were saying, Renzo Rivolta realised that an interpreter was needed. 'Fetch me someone who speaks German!' he ordered his assistant, who ran off straightaway and asked around among the clerical staff and shop-floor workers. Unobserved, a small young man detached himself from the group of workers to address Renzo Rivolta.

*'Scusi, commendatore...'*

Vincent could tell from the engineers' reaction that it wasn't seemly for a simple worker to speak to the *padrone* directly. But Rivolta turned towards him since he seemed to have a solution. Vincent didn't understand what the man was saying, he was speaking and gesticulating rapidly, but he could see that the worker had a different physiognomy than Rivolta and the northern Italian engineers – he was smaller and had a dark, olive complexion, and his deferential, almost slightly obsequious posture contrasted starkly with his urgent need to communicate and the mischievous spark of intelligence in his eyes. Renzo Rivolta nodded at him, and the worker ran off into one of the offices.

Moments later he returned, pulling a young secretary by the hand, who, startled, quickly adjusted her smart light-blue suit. She had a pert, chin-length haircut, and was younger than Vincent, but, at the same time, something inscrutably old shone from her eyes.

*'Ecco, commendatore!'* said the worker, presenting her to his employer. She curtsied briefly, smiled, and Renzo Rivolta asked her her name.

*'Marconi Giulietta,'* she said.

Vincent could still remember to this day that she said her surname ahead of her first name. And he could remember the gleam of her dark eyes, her fine cheekbones, her delicate body that was at the same time tense with energy, her clear and simultaneously sensuous voice, and the first German word that she said to him, somewhat demurely but with a warm smile: 'Welcome.' She introduced herself with a clear but pleasant accent as a secretary in the distribution office. She told him she'd taken a German course during her secretarial training and would interpret for him. Their eyes met for a tiny moment longer than expected, then she looked away again, out of shame or politeness, he didn't know which. This first look – was it one or two seconds? – contained everything that was to remain a lifelong mystery for Vincent: how Giulietta's youthful zest for life and passion wrestled inside her with an ancient

force, a dark shadow of melancholy and futility. When we encounter a great love, for a brief moment we're removed from the confinements of space and time. We're not only confronted with a person but with something that shines through them, an inkling that, contrary to all expectation, we might once again be granted the happiness of rediscovering the perpetual opulence of our childhood, when the world was an endless summer.

‘Guilietta,’ she said and laughed, ‘like Romeo and Giulietta.’

‘Very pleased to meet you. Vincent Schlewitz,’ he replied much too stiffly, shaking her hand formally. He was trying to conceal from the others the impression she'd made on him. The little worker who had fetched her, and was keeping a jealous watch over her, was that her husband? Her boyfriend? Neither of them was wearing a ring, but the strong bond between them was unmistakable.

[...]

It wasn't only Giulietta's unconventional beauty that enthralled him. When he looked back today on their first encounters, he remembered above all an indefinable feeling that bewildered him: the sense of having found in her the mother of his children – or was it just wishful thinking? No other woman before or after Giulietta had made him feel this way. Vincent didn't believe in destiny, he wasn't a religious man. He'd seen too many atrocities, at too young an age, in the last years of the war, to believe anything other than that man was entirely on his own and that only his rational mind saved him from being led astray by false belief and from the abyss of himself.

The end of the war had been his personal ‘zero hour’ in which he questioned all of his previous assumptions and took his life into his own hands. And yet today, at the end of his life, it seemed to him that what happened in Milan in 1954 hadn't resulted from a deliberate decision but was instead a brief moment outside of his control in which life itself grabbed hold of him, as if he were a wave in the ocean, part of a larger whole. In that carefree summer, the seeds were sown for the love of his life, for Giulietta's death, and the curse on Vincenzo's soul.