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Bruce J. Berger
Ten or Eleven

HAUPTMANN WILHELM RIEGER dragged on his black Nordiano and blew a cloud of smoke toward the bound man in front of him. The head monk, if that's what he was, sat and watched him, helpless to prevent the cigarette's nauseating miasma from washing over his heavy black beard and deeply lined face. The monk's arms were tied to the chair behind his back, his ankles tied to the chair's front legs. His gold cross had been ripped from around his neck and stowed in Rieger's pack. The monk had not resisted, had not even raised his hands to defend himself when Rieger slapped him twice on the face just for the fun of it. Now, Rieger sat opposite the monk. He held his pistol in his right hand and randomly tapped its barrel against his polished black boots.

"You're hiding Jews on this property, an underground bunker somewhere or a secret closet, and you will show me where they are, or you and your fellow bearded swine will be shot." Rieger was only a lower-ranked officer but spoke with the authority of a general; his combination of demand and threat varied little from what he'd been taught to say in such situations. His interpreter was a private whose mother had been Greek and who mimicked Rieger's volume and sneering tone as best he could.

"You needn't interpret for me, son," the monk confessed to the private. "I know German."

"Then go," Rieger said to his subordinate, who complied, but not before spitting on the monk. The gob hit the prisoner's right ear, and Rieger watched it slowly change shape as it descended to the monk's neck. He thought for a second about wiping it off, then caught himself. The creeping saliva would accentuate the monk's feeling of helplessness and bring the meeting to a successful conclusion more quickly. When a minute had passed, Rieger continued. "So, where are they?"

"You have been misinformed, Herr Hauptmann. We have not hidden Jews here."

"We know some fled north from Salonika. We rounded up three in Serres. Shot them immediately, as they deserved, but that's not your concern, is it? We were told another three had come to ... what's the name of this stinking place?"

"The Holy Monastery of St. Vlassios."

"Holy my ass. Now, where are they?"

Rieger was tired after the day's exertions, and his voice began to lose some of its edge. His heart wasn't quite so much in his job as it had been when the forces of the Third Reich had first occupied northern Greece. He'd become suddenly important, the military governor of a string of villages, his only fighting an occasional skirmish with poorly-organized partisans who, for the most part, wanted to stay hidden in the mountains. Finding and killing the scavenger Jews who avoided the deportations had been a defining part of his mission. He'd accepted all the teachings of National Socialism, the most important of which had been that the Jews were vermin and that the fate of humanity itself depended upon their being

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found and neutralized. It was war, and in war one had to do things that one would not do in times of peace. Since his time with the Hitler Youth, it had always made sense. And, he was happy to see, it made sense to most Greeks too. So many were willing to inform on their countrymen in hiding.

But doubts had begun to creep in as the tide of the war turned. The German brigades in Greece were in danger of being cut off by the Soviet army advancing across the Balkans. Rieger knew that, within days, he would be ordered to withdraw. In a day or two, he would be back in an active war zone, dealing with an unstoppable and vicious enemy. He would be lucky to survive such fighting, but if it was fate's decree that he die, then at least he could say – or others could say about him – that he had done his duty to the Fuhrer and the Fatherland. On the other hand, if he lived but the Allies ended up victors, hardly believable a year earlier but now very much believable, he might be judged very poorly indeed. The Allies might call him a murderer, as if he could be personally responsible for fulfill his duties to the Fuhrer and following orders. Yet, fear of consequences could never be allowed to interfere with duty. Until the order of retreat, he knew what his duties were. Find and destroy the Jews and those who harbored them. He would continue to be an exterminator of the highest rank.

“If I knew – which I assure you I don't – I wouldn't tell you.”

Father Augustin Liakos spoke with quiet assurance. He sensed that he and the other nine monks would be killed by the Germans regardless of what he said or did. He had no great aversion to death; rather, he welcomed the idea that his life and those of his fellow monks would be martyred and hoped that someone, somewhere would discover their story and write about it. But, he thought with great regret, their martyrdom would be too late to save the lives of those who had come to them in fear and whom they had turned away. He needed to make confession before dying, but how? Who could hear it and absolve him, when all were about to be killed?

The Germans had left St. Vlassios alone throughout the occupation, as long as the monastery provided no aid to the partisans and did not resist German rule, and he'd thought it his obligation to remain neutral. To have resisted would have been foolhardy, he had reasoned, and would lead only to the destruction of the monastery. And to what end? Throwing himself before a firing machine gun, as it were, would not have slowed down the Germans in the slightest. His body would be left where it fell unless the villagers took it upon themselves to bury it. At most, his death would cost the Germans a few bullets, and he was sure there were millions available and that those lost in his dead body would not be missed. If he managed to stay out of their way, he thought, the monastery could remain as a spiritual haven, and souls could be saved for the glory of Christ.

“You feel that life is so cheap that you can give up yours and those of your flock so easily? For the sake of a few shit-eating Jews?”

“What did you do before the war, Herr Hauptmann?”

Rieger flicked the safety off. Both he and Liakos stared at it for a second, then at each other. Rieger was sorely tempted to end the discussion

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at once, in his typical way. Two months earlier, Rieger would have been quick to step behind Liakos's chair, place the muzzle of the gun up to the monk's lower neck, and fire. He would have done so without reservation, because as unpleasant as it was to kill a human being, particularly a priest, although of a religion that seemed bizarre to him, killing in the service of a greater good was an honor. No one would have reprimanded him. Now, however, that feeling of moral superiority on which he relied had all but evaporated, disappearing as the dawn's mist gives way to the sun's rays. Rieger had a quick vision of his own father sitting there bound to a chair; he blinked, reminding himself that his father was hundreds of miles away, safe in Berlin. Liakos's voice and demeanor sounded to Rieger as if he was asked by his father what he had learned at school that day. But, no, it was only Liakos who sat before him, completely subject to his will

"I studied accounting for two years, but enlisted in 1938."

"You knew war was coming."

"Everyone knew."

"There is still time to repent, Herr Hauptmann, still time to turn toward Christ the Savior and beg His forgiveness. He will forgive those who sincerely repent of their sins, no matter how big the sins." Liakos spoke as he had spoken the same message to hundreds of believers and non-believers over the years. He had long ago found that a calm, steady voice was best suited to drawing to him those who were unsure. Belief had to come from within, where God's Grace could act only if the person was ready.

"Repent? It is not a sin to follow the wishes of one's father, and my father is the Fuhrer, and he is the father of all the German nation, and I will ..."

He was about to explain, although he felt no need to, why the Jews had started the war, why the Jews presented a mortal threat, not only to German people everywhere, but to all of Orthodox Christianity as well, and certainly to St. Vlassios or his monastery, and the ten monks there with Liakos, when a private poked his head in and handed him a written order. Greek partisans had ambushed a German patrol, killing three. Reprisals were commanded. Rieger was to kill without delay all of the monks and destroy the monastery. He looked up at Liakos and smiled. "Your death wish has arrived, Herr Monk."

No one could explain why there were ten in total and not eleven. When the Germans stormed into the monastery and tied up the monks, Rieger was certain that there were ten in addition to Liakos. No one could offer him even the wildest hypothesis about where the other monk had gone. Confronted by Rieger, Liakos looked at the other nine and said "They are all here. No one is missing," at which Rieger struck Liakos with his pistol, opening up a large gash over the left eye.

Liakos bled profusely. He fell to his knees for an instant as he tried to absorb the pain and watched in wonder at the spurting blood staining the floor of the church. He looked up at Rieger as if expecting another blow, but Rieger had holstered his pistol. Liakos managed to regain his feet.

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"There is still time, Herr Hauptmann."

"Time for what?" asked a sergeant, who kept his semi-automatic pistol aimed at the group of monks waiting to be taken to their deaths.

"Shut up," ordered Rieger, embarrassed that Liakos had spoken to him like that in front of the other soldiers.

Rieger's platoon marched the column of ten monks into the forest west of the monastery. The terrain gradually descended, and the pine forest grew thicker around them. About two miles from the monastery, Rieger called a halt, had the monks' hands freed, and ordered them to begin digging their graves. The Germans stood, surrounding them, waiting. Although one might have thought that these condemned men would delay completion of their graves and thus extend their lives, even by a few minutes, the reverse seemed to be true. They dug with great energy, all the more surprising because some were quite old and did not give the appearance of great strength. Rieger wanted the graves to be deep. He wanted to hide well the fruits of what he had commanded, although only a month earlier he would have been pleased to kill all the monks right there at the monastery and leave their bodies to be discovered by the villagers.

As he dug, Liakos murmured encouragement to the others, told them not to be afraid of death, and urged them to make the graves as deep as they could. He too did not want the bodies to be found. He knew that only ten monks, including himself, lived at St. Vlassios, but eleven monks had been tied up. The eleventh, the one that could no longer be found, had been a visitor from a world that was not that of St. Vlassios or of the nearby town of Serres or even of the earth. For a second, upon first seeing him, Liakos thought that this visitor must be Christ Himself, that he was a witness to Christ's Second Coming. The idea as outrageous though. The Second Coming could not coincide with the horrible war that was upon them. What then? An angel? The Devil himself? Perhaps God had sent a messenger to guide Rieger, but the messenger had been unable to deliver the message and departed before he could be killed, departed the same way he had come. Or had the eleventh been a figment of everyone's imagination?

Meanwhile, even as the minute drew closer when Rieger would give his men the order to shoot, Liakos's invitation to repent weighed in his heart. He thought about a young Jewish girl he shot, the one whose face struck him as angelic just at the very instant of his pulling the trigger. He knew even as he shot that she was not the vermin that Hitler had imagined, that none of them were, but before the bullet had bored through her head the idea of their innocence was gone. Her face came before him again, and he realized that repentance was out of the question. Not even a God of mercy could forgive Rieger for what Rieger had done and was about to do, if such a God existed. Rieger did not want Divine forgiveness, if by attaining forgiveness he was required to disobey his orders or abandon his true father.

"Lie down, face down," Rieger screamed. Liakos tossed his spade out of the ditch, which was now almost two meters deep, and lay prone in its center, his arms outstretched over his head as if he were preparing to dive into a pool. Rieger kept yelling, and one by one the other nine monks lay

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down, positioning themselves as Liakos had done. Only two monks could fit next to Liakos, the next three were forced to lie directly atop the first three, and then the four last monks were forced to lie atop the pile of six.

Rieger stood looking at them, his platoon ready to shoot on command. He listened closely for sounds of praying. He thought it only right that they should pray before death, because there was nothing after death, as we all knew, and he wanted to be able to say that he had been generous and thoughtful before carrying out his orders. But we heard nothing, not even a sob or a whimper, no pleas for mercy, no last-minute confessions, no begging for absolution, nothing to indicate fear, nothing but quiet certainty.

We obeyed Rieger's orders and fired.