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Constantinople 1921

Night falls early in winter and Aunt Marika was stingy with oil lamps. Theodosia had reading to do for her homework, but there were no more candles. She had used the last one yesterday. She was thirteen, had just entered *parthenagogio* (girls' high school), and took her education seriously. Being the oldest among two brothers and two sisters who had lost both their parents, she felt a responsibility that gave her strength. In any case, she was driven by her nature toward studying. She was proud to attend such a good Greek school as the *Ioakimio Parthenagogio*. But Aunt Marika couldn't have cared less about her education. In fact, she would have preferred that Theodosia stay home and do housework for the rest of her life.

Theodosia put on her coat and boots in preparation for another clandestine outing. She reminded herself to watch out for the iron spikes of the window lattice so that she wouldn't hurt her leg again while climbing out. An ugly scar on her leg from that wound was still sensitive. It was to remain visible for the rest of her life, testifying to that painful experience.

The church of St. Vlacherna was not far away. Serving the large Greek community of Constantinople, it remained open at all times. One of the oldest and most celebrated Greek Orthodox churches—founded in 450 AD—it was home to an icon of the Virgin Mary credited with many miracles over the centuries. When Theodosia entered the church, there was no one in sight. The dim lighting came only from burning candles and oil lanterns hanging from the roof. She crossed herself and then kissed the icon of the Virgin. She said in a soft audible voice, "Holy Mary, please forgive me. I need these candles for my studying," and took five thin candles from the tray without leaving any money. She didn't feel guilty for doing so. She was sure that the Virgin understood and didn't mind.

Theodosia's life had taken a dramatic downturn in only a few years.

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The prison of Pavlou Mela used to be a Greek military camp before the Germans came. Now it housed 600–650 prisoners serving as a pool to draw from whenever executions were required for reprisals. It was run by Heuser—a Gestapo sergeant who had become camp commander—a short, fat man with harsh gray hair and the air of a field marshal. His Nazi fanaticism had reduced him to a subhuman level. At some point he walked up to Giorgos Sr. and slapped him on the face for no reason or provocation whatsoever.

The prisoners in the Pavlou Mela camp came from all over Macedonia, part of Thessaly, and many Aegean islands. They were peasants, laborers, merchants, scientists, officers, etc. Some were accused of sabotage or having helped British troops to escape, others for collaboration with guerrillas, others for stealing German equipment in particular food, and some for “false denouncement.” Many, like the Modises and Hatzitasis, didn’t know why they were there. Three days after their arrival a German-speaking prisoner who served as interpreter to Heuser confided to Giorgos Sr. that terrible charges had been filed against them. Presumably they were preparing a revolution and the slaughtering of Germans and Bulgarians, whose heads they would kick-roll down the streets of Florina. These charges had been made under oath to the Germans by some “fellow citizens”, protagonists of the Bulgarian cause.

The Modises and Hatzitasis had arrived at midnight. The prematurely awakened prison guard who received them scratched his head a little and then decided, “I will take you to the best ward, where the ambassadors are.”

He took them to a large irregular room on the first floor. Everything was concrete, which made your bones freeze on those cold days. The beds consisted of three boards, sometimes with some hay on them, on two wooden horse stands. The “ambassadors” included a Jewish merchant from Thessaloniki who had also served as unpaid consul for Norway. He had converted to Christianity a year earlier and, together

with another newly-converted Jew, had made the silly move of going to the Gestapo and asking whether they too had to wear the yellow Star of David required for all Jews. The Gestapo's answer was to send them to the prison of Pavlou Mela.

Several other Jews, among them the biggest merchants of Thessaloniki, were in the same thirty-five-bed ward. The Germans had confiscated all their merchandise and then locked them up in prison.

"They took all our stuff," lamented the older one while trying to warm up his boney hands on a brazier releasing meager heat. And he continued in Greek contaminated with Turkish expressions, "Oooooo.K. Fifty-year sweat down the drain, Oooooo.K. But why put us in jail? For *dis-parasi*?" meaning "money for the teeth" in Turkish. During the Turkish occupation the Turks often went to eat and drink in Christian homes. They sat down at the table but they did not start eating until the host put some money next to their plate. If the amount wasn't satisfactory they waited for it to be increased before beginning eating. The money was supposed to be for the wear and tear on their teeth!

In the same ward there were two men from the island Lemnos, shoemaker Vasilis Panoudis and schoolteacher Andriotis. The latter was well educated and spoke French and German. They had been arrested together for an absurd reason.

"It was my bad luck," Vasilis told Giorgos Sr. "During the first days when the Germans came to Lemnos, a German came to my store and by waving his hands he made me understand that he too was a shoemaker and that he needed to repair his boots. He came again at other times to repair more boots. And then he disappeared. However, one day I received a letter with no stamps on it but with many German seals. As it was in German I asked the schoolteacher Andriotis to read it to me. The letter was from Hans, my fellow-craftsman. While the teacher was reading it, the Gestapo suddenly showed up. Because it was written in the letter, '... now we have war with Russia and our ideology will prevail.' What ideology? I was neither with Hitler nor with the communists. I was a family man, always liberal and democratic. What the hell got into him to write to me? Didn't he have other friends who would be able to read his writing?"

And then he continued, depressed, "Fourteen months ago we were found innocent in a court-martial, and yet the Gestapo still keeps us imprisoned. Their court-martials seem to function, but this Gestapo ..." he left his phrase unfinished.

“Now I also feel guilty for poor Andriotis,” Vasilis continued his sad monologue. “His wife claims that it was my fault. What did I do wrong? Don’t look at him now. The prison has made him sick and a hypochondriac. You should have seen him before. He was the best-educated teacher about to be promoted to school inspector.”

Kanatas and Titos, two young men from Rapsani, had almost gotten executed because of a donkey. Kanatas proceeded to tell the story, “The Germans had locked many of us in the school. Around midnight the German guard mistook a donkey for a partisan. He took a shot at him, which prompted another guard to also shoot in that direction. Others from the encampment began shooting at the shadows of the trees. In the end there were two wounded. The Germans got so mad they wanted to execute everyone, about sixty people! Fortunately, the interpreter caught the ‘partisan’ donkey and so we were spared. But they brought us here for punishment.”

The thirty-five prisoners of the ward lived under a permanent cloud of fear brought to the foreground by the sound of any odd motor-vehicle engine. Is it a paddy wagon? Is it the interrogator? Is it the camp commander? It didn’t make much difference. Death lurked behind all of them. For whom would they be coming next time?

But at dusk the mood changed. The day had gone well. The night was all theirs. They could laugh during the night and they laughed uncontrollably. Following a day of tension and anxiety, they let go, told jokes, made farces. The songs of Kanatas and Titos were sweet and full of sorrow until midnight. A soldier guard outside joined the singing in sympathy.

On the morning of March 1, 1943 Giorgos Sr. woke up very early.

“Are you awake already?” Vasilis asked him. His bed was thirty centimeters away. “You are still at the beginning. Don’t take things badly. God is merciful. It will all pass.”

“You are right, Vasilis, everything passes,” replied Giorgos Sr., not convinced that what he said sounded reassuring.

When the first sunrays came in through the ward’s enormous windows they diffused some color from the colorful blankets of a few rich Jews. One by one the inmates began waking up, some going to the bathroom, others beginning to shave.

Suddenly the sound of vehicles moving into the camp’s yard was heard. Before one had time to take notice of the vehicle sound an abrupt change took place in the ward. All faces turned yellow; eyes immobile, wide open with consternation and fear. Everyone stood still,

petrified, breathless, as if some electric current had immobilized them. Some were looking at each other idiotically. Others were looking at the windows or into space with eyes that seemed big but empty and blind. No one uttered a word, or moved a little finger. A fly walking could be heard.

“What’s the matter? What is going on?” Giorgos Sr. whispered. He was himself overcome by the widespread agony and paralysis without even knowing why.

“Are you blind? Can’t you see? The paddy wagons,” said a voice that Giorgos Sr. didn’t identify.

He then noticed two large trucks completely covered from all sides parked underneath their windows; a third one stood further away. Many German soldiers were jumping out of them fully armed. There were also four or five from the German Military Police. They could be recognized by the metal gorgets they were wearing, a flat metal crescent with ornamental designs suspended by a chain worn around the neck.

Giorgos Sr. didn’t want to admit what was happening, “Wait a minute, fellows, maybe they are not here for the worst. Maybe they will be transferring some of us elsewhere; it is very crowded in this building.”

The initial consternation had subsided and now everyone was trying to control his nerves and regain his posture.

“Good Lord, I wish it were,” said Vasilis and made the sign of the cross, and then continued, “but so much fuss for a simple transfer—I don’t believe it.”

“But we haven’t heard of any sabotage or other action by the resistance. Why should they do it?” asked Giorgos Sr.

“Search me,” replied Titos. “Remember the donkey of Rapsani? This time it could be the rats of Thessaloniki! Here, you guys, have a cigarette, it could be our last,” and offered his cigarette pack.

Giorgos Jr. had been speechless, paralyzed with terror, from the first moment the paddy wagons had shown up. He didn’t really smoke—he’d light a cigarette only on occasions of intense sorrow or intense joy—but he took this one.

Before long they heard steps and talking on the marble stairs leading to the floor upstairs. On other days there would be so much noise from shouts, fights, and songs coming out from all the wards. But that day one could think that there was not a soul in the whole building, only the heavy sound of boots on marble and the echoing of German voices from the concrete.

The steps stopped at the second-floor ward. It was clear that they were to go first. Someone in front of Giorgos Jr. made the sign of the cross devoutly; it wasn't clear whether he meant it for those facing death upstairs or was thanking God that it wasn't him.

The inmates gathered in front of the windows. The two trucks outside began filling up with people. Pale but calm, the men about to die took their seats, one next to the other. "Brothers, take revenge," they shouted in the direction of the windows where the two Modises and the others were standing.

Pashalidis, a medical school graduate, had a sad smile on his face. A young German policeman was crying like a child by the wall behind the trucks; he must have been the only human in that flock of beasts.

"Look, they even took old Tonos!"

"Is that possible?"

"Come and see him."

They watched him climbing on the truck with difficulty. He sat next to the others after carefully buttoning his gray coat.

He was an old man from the island of Lesbos, who ran a travel agency. He had been accused of helping British soldiers to escape. The court martial had found him innocent, but the Gestapo kept him there. Still, he was not considered a high risk and was allowed to come and go freely to Thessaloniki, doing shopping for the camp. He expected his release anytime. His blacklisting was a bad omen for everyone.

"A very bad day," whispered Vasilis, "no one can be safe."

Suddenly the heavy sound of boots came from outside their ward. The blood stopped circulating in everyone's veins; they looked at each other speechless. They all changed appearance again; yellow faces, but this time with a glow in their look, like that of the early Christian martyrs. Everyone thought that his last moments had arrived and that he had to sum up the courage to face the situation.

The iron door opened with a bang that resounded in the deadly silence of the hall as if it were empty. Three grim and grave Germans walked in armed with pistols and machineguns. They were followed by the stooping prison guard whose face was also yellow. The dreadful entourage stopped in the middle of the room with the Germans throwing cold and apathetic glances around. The prison guard, always bent forward, called the names with a hoarse voice: "Vasilis Panoudis," he said and stopped as if he lost his voice; and then he added hurriedly, "Andriotis."

Vasilis was standing next to Giorgos Sr. He showed no reaction on his pale face.

“Good bye, fellows, I hope you have better luck,” he said and began toward the door. But stopped for a second and turning toward Giorgos Sr. added, “In my suitcase there are sixty thousand drachmas and some biscuits. Send them to my poor wife.” He then walked to the door with a calm steady pace as if he were going to his store in Limnos. The Germans stepped aside for him to pass. They looked at him with wonder and perhaps some admiration.

Andriotis, the sickly teacher, lost his composure and broke into heartbreaking crying. “What did I do? Whom have I harmed?” he kept repeating. “My poor children! My miserable children!” he screamed with despair. He wanted to be saved. He tried to run but stopped. He turned his back to the Germans and broke into tears again. He took his golden wedding ring off his finger and raised it high with his right hand, “Take my ring and give it to my wife.”

No one moved to take it and he couldn’t decide whom to turn to. With confused steps he circled around as if in a tragic dance, holding the ring high up with his hand, his pale face distorted by the fitful crying and the harrowing refrain, “My poor children! My miserable children!”

There was a harsh German voice, “*Com, com.*”

The teacher, circling around, always crying and holding the ring in his hand, walked out. The heavy door closed shut again.

Sighs were heard from several directions. Was it sadness for the unjust loss of comrades or relief that they had been spared one more day? But the calm interlude didn’t last long. In a few minutes the steps were heard again.

The iron door opened again with the same loud bang and the terrible entourage walked in at the same grim and grave pace. More blood was needed; the count should be fifty and they did not have enough. Fifty Greeks had to be executed as reprisal for the distribution of communist propaganda sheets. All hope was gone. Giorgos Jr. thought this would be his end. All inmates snuggled around a column in the middle of the room trying to hide behind it in a desperate move of self-preservation.

The pale stooping prison guard shouted hurriedly like a gabbler, “Kanatas, Titos.”

The two friends were shaken when they heard their names. “God damn them! Sons of bitches! Us too? The motherfuckers!” cursed Kanatas and started for the door. But immediately turned around,

grabbed his coat from his bed and threw it on his shoulders as if he was afraid to catch a cold. Both of them rushed out without saying good-bye, not even looking back.

There was silence. The Germans gave a scornful look to the rest, swung round, and left. The door closed behind them. Inside everyone remained transfixed. Someone whispered, "Are they coming again?" No one moved; no one talked. The Jews that had gathered in the middle leaned on each other for support and stood speechless, isolated. A relative of Kanatas was weeping. Hatzitasis, the doctor with a heart condition, was looking blankly at the ceiling, or more accurately at the sky.

Kanatas was heard singing outside, "Cry for me, Mother, cry for me ...". Another song came in response from another truck, "Goodbye, pitiable world ...". It was a well-known Greek folksong from the early nineteenth century that had been sung by women in the remote mountain village of Souli when they jumped off a cliff with their children in order to avoid capture and enslavement by the Turks.

But harsh German voices made them shut up.

More shouting was heard as the tents of the trucks came down, "Revenge! Revenge!"

The curtain dropped. A cerecloth was already wrapped around those men still alive but soon to be killed. The trucks disappeared in the distance, leaving smoke behind them like the incense burning in the Greek Church.

In the afternoon anguished voices were heard through the prison yard, distant calls of mothers and brothers, "Is Nikos still with you? Is Giannis alive?"