

The Odd Hostage

In shocked whispers, the news, the bad news, ran round the bank in record time. Two German soldiers had been murdered, stabbed, near Omonia Square. The bank was in the same area so that anyone in it could regard themselves as being in a danger zone. Athens wasn't a safe or peaceful place to be in 1943 with the Germans occupying Greece.

Sitting at his desk, his precious parcel at his feet, Heracles Stefanou bit on his pencil. Outside the July summer sky hadn't a care, or a cloud, but inside the bank the staff remained rigid with fear. Perhaps Heracles had reacted more sensitively since he was a poet and a pianist, banking being the way he earned a living. Some of the staff began to move around, creeping up to the windows.

Killing German soldiers was unforgivable. There would be reprisals, swift and final. If you toed the line, did as the Germans ordered, you came to little harm. The worst enemy was hunger and Heracles had seen people slide to their deaths on the pavements of Athens. Now, for some, the passive co-operation phase had passed after two years, and sabotage and guerrilla bands operated on a larger scale.

Heracles didn't blame them. Desperation drove them. He was too old and asthmatic to join such groups. Besides he had a wife and two young daughters to consider. He pushed his glasses back, rubbed his eyes. All he wanted to do was to get home with his parcel. Reprisals meant death and he didn't want to die before his younger daughter's birthday tomorrow.

The bank was empty of customers. Those who had heard the news had scurried out. Soon the military vans would come by, screaming out the orders and instructions in two languages. They were very precise, most correct, did everything by the book, including cruelty and kindness. They gave rationed milk to babies, loved the Greek ruins, but broke bones if a boy tried to steal a loaf of bread.

Yianni leaned across from the next desk. "It's nearly closing time," he whispered, "We'll have to leave here soon."

Heracles rocked in his seat. "Yes."

"You get your parcel okay? Down by the old bus station?"

Heracles nodded. In the parcel, the covering made by a piece of old flour bag, were the almost impossible to get ingredients, some of them, for his daughter Athena's birthday cake – the honey, scarce as petrol, the walnuts and the olive oil. Athena would be twelve tomorrow and had just recovered from pneumonia.

How he longed to just get up and go home. He felt guilty too. His wife, Sophia hadn't wanted him to sell her treasured silk mat on the black market. They'd argued about it . . .

"The mat will last forever. Better to keep it for a wedding gift for Athena." Her brown eyes flashed. "The cake will be gone in a few minutes. Anyway, I don't trust those black market crooks down there."

"Sophia, dear – please – there's a war on. We must make a happy day for Athena. She's not tough like her sister, Dora. It's, it's the now that matters."

She sniffed. "All right. Have your way." She thrust the rolled up mat into his arms. "Take it."

The girls were asleep. Dora, he smiled, with her violin next to her, Athena, her face on the pillow as he crept out of the small house on Phaleron Bay. There was no curfew at the moment

but he still had to be careful. Some patrols could be quite officious. Keeping close to the buildings, his thin body taut as he held on to the quite heavy mat. It took him about thirty minutes to traverse the streets to the bus station.

More life buzzed here. Dark and dank, the old buses stood like worn-out farm horses, but belching noxious fumes, in the old shed of a building. Heracles had to tread carefully on the uneven watery surface. He had ordered his needs previously and the trader was on the lookout for him.

Cap low on his forehead, a shabby coat covering his body, he pulled Heracles behind a pillar.

“Show me.” He held out his dirty hands.

Heracles unrolled the mat. The bright colours shone even in this gloom. The blue-caped serene Maddonna, holding the infant Jesus, was surrounded by tans, golds and brilliant blues. It nearly brought tears to Heracles eyes.

“Looks OK to me.” He grabbed the mat and rolled it up. He shoved the parcel into Heracles hands and disappeared before Heracles could examine the parcel. It was so well bound up that there wasn't time . . .

Now he was sitting, dummy-like, in the bank, waiting: closing time 5 pm arrived. The manager told them he had to close the bank. The women put on their hats or scarves, the men tidied their desks. The blinds were lowered. The staff made a silent exit.

Heracles held his parcel close to his chest. The streets were emptying fast but some trams were still working. He stood with his back to the building, uncertain which way to go, not sure where the assault would come from. He strolled around the corner. He looked up. In the distance the Parthenon on top of the Acropolis crumbled but still stood. It reminded him of an earlier occupation: the Turks for nearly four hundred years. He could never understand how the Turks could have used the Parthenon as a powder magazine so that their enemies, the Venetians could blow it up. When was that? Over three hundred years ago. As a symbol of freedom it gave him a spark of hope.

Yianni came past. “Better get a move on Heracles.”

Just then a tram slowed down on the corner. Heracles jumped aboard, standing at the back. There was little to hear, only fear to feel. He didn't know where they were trundling to but just wanted to get out of the city. From his position at the back he had a good view of what was coming behind.

Suddenly the stragglers and carts were overtaken by army trucks. Sirens rent the air, voices blared. They were here, the German troops, big guns steady in their hands.

Heracles closed his eyes and prayed. He never imagined his life would end like this.

Two trucks with soldiers passed the tram, then turned around. “Halt!”

The tram stopped with a jerk. The passengers waited, nervous: he could see it in their eyes and movements: some crossed themselves.

Then began the short-term lecture, by an officer, smart in his greenish, well-cut uniform and shining leather. “You know why you are here. Two brave soldiers of the Wehrmacht have been murdered. We demand retribution. Zo. Fifty hostages will be taken. That is the price – fifty hostages to die.”

“Right. Out. Form a line and march to the square.” He pointed. The square wasn't far away.

Murmurings rippled through the crowd, pointless protestations. A few prods from the grim-face soldiery soon put a stop to that. Stoicism settled on the damned.

Heracles trailed behind the group of thin men and women, some young, some old, but they were mostly men. The ragged crocodile dragged itself to the execution site.

Heracles hoped he would acquit himself honourably when the moment came. His mind seemed to be operating on another plane. And everything was so quiet as if the world held its breath. Even the pigeons had disappeared. He'd heard about many patriots who, before the bullets hit, shouted "eleftheria" – freedom.

"Halt!"

There was already a small group of people huddled on the square.

"Right. Forward." A German officer began to count the hostages. "One, two, three as they passed him and were lined up by the soldiers in a line. At twenty-five he paused. "Another twenty-five."

He started to count again. The number of hostages shrank. Heracles trailed at the back. In his numbed state he could still reckon. This German had made a good estimate because there seemed to be exactly fifty people present.

He closed his eyes as his nemesis came nearer. Faintly he heard forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine – fifty.

"You, fifty-one, you can go."

Heracles opened his eyes and blinked. "Go, go?" he stammered stupidly.

"Yes, go on. Don't stand there. I said you can go. We only need fifty hostages for reprisal."

His head down, Heracles shuffled away, saved by the German respect for exactness. He couldn't even spare a backward glance for his doomed countrymen. So many had died this way, whole villages and their occupants burned to the ground – for reprisals. It took him a couple of hours to get near his seaside home. The rat, tat of the rifles kept repeating in his head.

He didn't go home at once. He turned and walked towards the beach. No sign of the enemy here. The sand seeping into his shoes slowed his progress to the water. The sea lay a calm stretch. The lights of the docks to the right gleamed dimly.

He felt so powerless. He was forty-five, his hair thinning, weary of being a prisoner in his own land. He had to pull himself together before he faced his family.

Lowering himself onto the sand, he laid the parcel down, that little package of hope and pleasure. He took off his shoes, his fingers nearly coming through the hole in the sole.

The water lapped the shore gently. There was little tide in the summer in the Saronic Gulf. The moon, a silver circle, cast its image on the rippling sea. Such a beautiful world – such pain. He got up and paddled for a few moments. The warmish water stilled his inner turmoil.

While he put on his shoes he looked along the beach. Just visible were two figures, struggling against the soft sand to reach the road. The shapes indicated a man and a woman. Flattened against the beach, he then saw silhouetted against the light, two German soldiers following the couple. His heart began to thud again. This could only mean trouble. He rose when all four had disappeared.

He ran, too, home. Outside his house he paused, breathless in the scent of oreganum and basil, about the only things not in short supply.

"Papa, Papa." His daughters and his wife crowded to the door. "Where have you been?" Athena clung to him, her thin face smiling. "Papa, is something the matter?"

He handed the parcel to Sophia. "We were so worried about you. I, I heard about the trouble downtown."

"I – just took a walk by the sea to, er, unwind. But I'm all right."

Sophia helped him off with his jacket, her fingers trembling.

He whispered in her ear. "Down there on the beach, I saw some people running. Chased by the Germans. Have you seen – anything?"

Sophia put her fingers to her lips, shook her head. "We'll talk later."

He nodded back, saddened further by the anxious expression in her eyes. He turned to his daughter. "Ah, Dora, I see you have been practising the violin."

"Oh, yes, Papa." Dora was the quiet one, loved music. Unfortunately, the piano, her favourite instrument, had been sold long ago.

"I'll get us something to eat." Sophia moved away.

Before she could get far, they were all struck as if to marble, by rifle butts banging on the door.

"Open, open." The strident order wasn't to be argued with. Without any preliminaries the German soldier demanded, "You have not seen two fugitives, a man and a woman? You are not hiding them?" His look was fierce.

With complete honesty, Heracles was able to reply, "No, we are hiding nobody." Sophia was clutching his hand like a vice. "Come in. See." He clutched Sophia's hand back.

They pushed in, looked around, poked under the beds.

"Come, Heinrich," the taller one said. "Nothing here."

Heinrich glared at the nervous family. "You know the penalty for harbouring Juden." He slid her hand across his throat.

Heracles nodded. Poor Jews, he thought, even worse off than us.

The girls, holding each other, watched in the gloom from the window, as the soldiers tramped off.

Heracles followed Sophia to the kitchen. "What's up?" he whispered.

"They are hiding behind the wood stack. They have a rendezvous nearby. They wouldn't come in," she shivered. "Just as well." He hugged her briefly. "All right. Let's try to act normal."

They joined the girls in the front room.

"The soldiers have gone, Papa. Listen." They heard the van's motor gunning and drive away.

In the kitchen Sophia opened Heracles well-bound barter parcel slowly. Strange there was no sweet smell. She held the parcel to her nose.

Inside the newspaper wrapping, her suspicions proved to be right. Poor Heracles, so trusting, had been duped. Never mind the loss of the heirloom; she was more worried about the desperate couple in the yard.

The nuts turned out to be acorns; she put her finger in the honey – pure sugar with no body. The oil? It never came from any olive trees. She shrugged. There were bad Greeks too. Parcelling up the rubbish, Sophia shoved it into a cupboard. Her husband was in no state to hear about this now.

"Papa," Athena's voice carried to the kitchen. "Don't look so sad. You're home safe and that's what matters most."

Sophia sighed as she tied on her apron. The child had a point. In the times they were living in, being together counted.

Dora began to play the violin, not too well, but the scrapings squeaks and false notes went unnoticed. To Heracles, the plaintive sound soothed well as saddened, softened the echoes of his brush with death. He smiled. Soon as he could he would have to go outside and see if the fugitives had gone. The day wasn't quite finished.