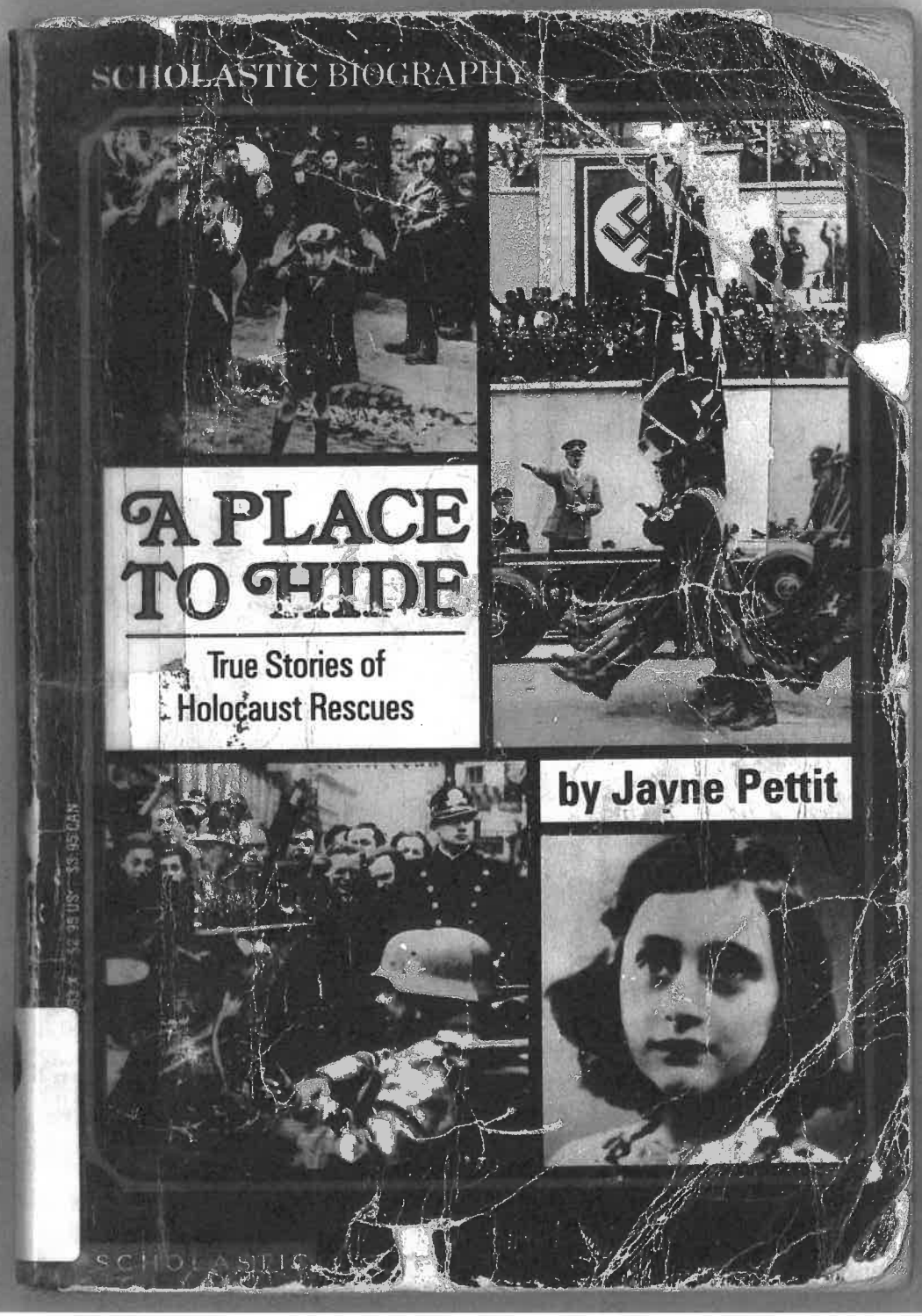
SCHOLASTIC BIOGRAPHY
A PLACE TO HIDE
True Stories of Holocaust Rescues
by Jayne Pettit

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The Secrets of Le Chambon

André and Magda Trocmé first came to Le Chambon in 1935, when André accepted a post as pastor of the Protestant temple. (A church of this sect is called a temple.) They were pacifists, opposed to violence. The people of Le Chambon took an immediate liking to the Trocmés, and soon the temple was the spiritual center of this remote peasant village high in the mountains of southern France. Year by year, as news of Germany's treatment of the Jews spread, André's sermons on nonviolence took on new meaning.

In 1938, the young minister started a secondary school based on his theories and practices. One of his first teachers was Édouard Theis, a classmate from the University of Paris. Like André, Édouard was a conscientious objector, opposed to war. Édouard Theis became André's right arm,

serving as director of the school and as an assistant minister at the temple.

Word of the new school quickly spread to Central and Eastern Europe, and young Jewish refugees began arriving in the village. New teachers were added to the faculty, among them André's wife, Magda, and Édouard Theis's wife, Mildred. Since there was no money for a school building, classes were held in homes and boardinghouses, and in the temple annex.

When France fell to the Germans in the summer of 1940, the country was divided into two zones. Le Chambon became a part of the southern zone, which was known as Vichy France. For a time, the Vichy government under Marshal Pétain left the southern towns and villages to themselves, with an occasional inspection or restriction ordered to pacify the Germans.

But it was not long before news of Nazi roundups and deportations of Jews in northern France reached Le Chambon, and the people lived in guarded calm, concerned for the Jewish students and for other refugees who had begun to arrive in the village.

Once, when a new order demanded that the flag of Vichy France be flown above the school, the teachers refused. And when André was told to ring the temple bell in honor of Pétain's birthday, the bell stayed silent. One day the government's minister of youth arrived at the school to enlist recruits for his newly established Youth Corps, a Nazi propaganda organization. André's students

responded by handing the minister a letter protesting the deportation of 28,000 Jews from Paris. Several days later, André received his first threat from Vichy officers in charge of the region. All Jews living in the village would be required to register at regional headquarters.

During the days that followed, André and his people developed a plan to protect the Jewish refugees. Every home and farm in the area was put on alert and word was passed that, at a given signal, the Jews were to escape into the dense woods of the surrounding countryside.

Late one night, two weeks after André had received his threat, a convoy of motorcycled police moved into the village. Behind them, a line of official limousines and three military buses followed. At the sound of the vehicles, street lamps lost their power and house lights switched off.

André was summoned to the village square and questioned by the Vichy chief of police, whose department had learned that a number of Jews were living in the village. The minister was threatened with deportation and ordered to hand over a list of Jewish names. The police would remain in the village overnight, the chief continued. In the morning the buses would take the Jews to Vichy headquarters.

When the minister was finally released, he walked through the blacked-out streets to his home and gave the signal for the evacuation. One by one, village boy scouts and Bible class leaders

spread their warnings to the Jews. All night long, as the police waited to fill their buses, people crept silently through the darkness.

On the following morning, Édouard Theis and André Trocmé preached to a capacity crowd that filled every seat and jammed the sidewalk leading to the temple entrance. Speaking of the Bible's teachings about the "cities of refuge" that God had chosen as hiding places to people in need of protection, the ministers urged their people to provide such a refuge for the Jews of Le Chambon.

While André and his people were gathered in the temple, they were unaware that the military police had interrupted an emergency meeting of the mayor's council and had ordered that the Jews be rounded up for a census-taking.

Throughout the afternoon, the police waited for the arrival of the Jews; when none appeared, they began searching every house and public building in the area, but they found no one. The next day, the search spread to the surrounding countryside, where a Jewish man and woman were discovered and arrested. The man was later released, but the woman never returned.

During the long months that followed, a number of Vichy police became involved in Le Chambon's rescue operation. Phones would ring in the middle of the night, and cryptic messages would warn the listener of a planned raid. Trocmé's "city of refuge" was gaining support.

One night during the bitter winter of 1941,

Magda Trocmé heard a knock on the door. Opening it, she faced a woman covered with snow. She was a refugee, she said. A German Jew who had crossed the northern border and fled south to Vichy France. Someone along the way had told her what was happening in Le Chambon. Magda urged the woman in and sat her in a chair by the fire. Later, she provided the woman with food and a warm bed.

That same winter, André traveled to Marseilles to meet with Burns Chalmers, an American Quaker active in getting Jewish children released from French concentration camps. Chalmers had also heard of Le Chambon's rescue operations. Could Trocmé and his people find refuge for these children? Soon, an old steam train appeared at the little station that served the villages of Le Chambon and Le Mazet. In it were the first children from the camps.

In November of 1942, southern France was overrun by the Germans. Marshal Pétain's government was reduced to a puppet show. The entire country was now under Nazi control.

In the months that followed, the people of Le Chambon and their growing number of refugees suffered many hardships. There was little food and many were hungry. Week by week, the steam train arrived with the newest refugees. During the summer of 1943, sixty Jews were housed in the Trocmé home at one time or another. André, Édouard, and Roger Darcissac (the head of Le Chambon's public school) worked to find other

hiding places for people and helped many to escape across the border into Switzerland.

On February 13, 1943, as Magda Trocmé was preparing dinner, she heard the familiar knock on the door. Major Silvani, the new chief of police for the surrounding region, and one of his lieutenants came to the Trocmé home and demanded to see André. He was to be arrested.

Magda ran to the basement and warned several of the refugees to get into their hiding places. Returning to the officers and André, she announced that the evening meal was ready. Sit down and eat, she ordered everyone — including the two police officers.

That night, André Trocmé, Édouard Theis, and Roger Darcissac were taken to an internment camp where prisoners were held before being sent to the death camps. Within days of their arrival, the three started a discussion group with a few of the prisoners. At first the men came reluctantly, sitting silently on the narrow cots lining André's prison barracks. Most of the men were leaders of the French underground.

Before long, more and more men came, and André asked the guards for a larger room to hold the meetings. The authorities became concerned. Several of the guards began attending the sessions, always sitting in the back of the room. After a month at the camp, Trocmé and his two friends were suddenly freed. Within days of their release, the camp was liquidated and its prisoners sent to the death camps.

* * *

Rescue efforts in Le Chambon continued until the end of the war. They were not without their tragedies. Daniel Trocmé, a cousin of André's, died in the Maidanek death camp in Poland on April 4, 1944. Jean-Pierre Trocmé, the eldest of the Trocmé children, died weeks before the Allied liberation.

Many years after the war, André and Magda Trocmé attended an international conference on nonviolence in Munich, Germany. While there, they met Julius Schmahling, a German retired professor who had once been an army major in charge of the region surrounding Le Chambon.

André and Magda asked Herr Schmahling why it was that Le Chambon had not been annihilated, even though it was known to be a haven for Jewish refugees. The Gestapo had raided Daniel Trocmé's dormitory at the school; André and his associates had been imprisoned for nearly a year; and André and Édouard themselves had been forced into hiding.

Herr Schmahling's reply was brief. He had been raised in the Catholic Church. He had followed some orders and he had ignored others. What had touched him was the quiet resistance of the peasants of Le Chambon. That, he answered, was something the Germans could never destroy.

5
Padre Niccacci's Assisi Underground

At dawn on the morning of October 19, 1943, a small cluster of men — eleven in all — hurried silently past balconied rows of pink stone houses in the medieval Italian hilltown of Assisi. Making their way along the maze of narrow alleyways, the men arrived at the train station just in time for the 6:00 A.M. express to Florence. Led by a monk dressed in his clerical habit, the group boarded the nearest car and rushed toward the first empty compartment, opened a door, and disappeared inside.

For a time, the men continued their silence as the train moved through the rolling countryside, past olive groves and grazing cattle. It was all beautiful and peaceful; far removed from the horror they had experienced only a few hours before.

Finally, one of the men, Padre Rufino Niccacci, spoke. Reaching into his robes, he brought out ten small prayer books, and handed one to each passenger. In case of trouble, he warned them. Who would interrupt a man absorbed in his daily prayers?

The men had reason to be cautious and fearful. One careless gesture or reference to their true identities could cost them their lives. Ten of these men were running away. Their only hope for survival rested on the shoulders of this thirty-two-year-old monk, a peasant of the hill country. A stranger.

In 1943, Italy was in a state of turmoil. Mussolini, Italy's fascist dictator and Hitler's ally, was in prison. By summer's end, Italy had signed an armistice with the Allies, and thousands of Italian soldiers had deserted the army. In retaliation, the Germans had marched into Rome. On October 18, less than a month later, over one thousand Jewish men, women, and children had been deported to Auschwitz. The raids had begun.

The ten Jewish refugees speeding to Florence with Padre Niccacci that morning had escaped the roundup, fleeing with nothing but the clothing on their backs. They had lost everything — their wives, their children, their relatives, and their homes.

As the men sat clutching their books and practicing their prayers, the train slowed down. They were approaching Perugia, the padre whispered. They were to be alert, stay as calm as possible

and, above all, to keep their eyes focused on the pages before them. Then the whistle blew and the train screeched to a stop.

Padre Niccacci, his eyes fixed on the compartment's window, watched as a small scattering of passengers left the train and a much larger number of people raced across the platform to board. Everywhere he looked, Gestapo troops kept guard, their glances darting from one passenger to the next, searching.

Suddenly, the door to the compartment flew open. A Gestapo officer walked in with his Italian interpreter, demanding to see papers. Quickly, Padre Niccacci handed over the letter from his *monsignore*, Bishop Giuseppe Placido Nicolini, identifying the ten Jews as Christians returning home to Florence after a holy pilgrimage to Assisi.

The officer turned his attention to an elderly, bearded Jew sitting in the corner seat, demanding to see his identification papers. The old man, a rabbi dressed in monk's robes, went through the motions of looking for the nonexistent papers when suddenly an air raid siren sounded. Seconds later, planes roared overhead and there was the blast of an explosion.

The officer ran from the compartment and out of the train to seek shelter, followed by swarms of German soldiers scrambling for cover. The train started to move, pulling out of the station with agonizing slowness. While the engine built up steam, bombs ripped through the roof of the stationhouse. The British were attacking the Ger-

man airfield outside of Perugia, and some of their firepower had missed its mark.

While Padre Niccacci and his "pilgrims" watched the planes of the Royal Air Force fly off into the distance, the train to Florence gradually picked up speed and completed its journey. Upon their arrival, the ten Jewish refugees were placed under the care of Cardinal Elio della Costa, Archbishop of Florence, while plans were made for an escape route to Genoa, and then north to Switzerland. So ended the Assisi underground's first rescue operation. In the tense year ahead, hundreds more would follow.

During the weeks that followed Padre Niccacci's return from the city of Florence, the Germans tightened their hold on Italy. Driving north from Rome, they soon had control of the country, and military convoys bearing swastikas became a common sight along the highways leading to the front lines. But for the moment, no German soldiers patrolled the streets of Assisi, whose Fascist mayor, Arnaldo Fortini, assured his people that their holy shrines would be spared.

For a time, life went on as usual in the village, the bells of the basilica and the other monasteries and convents alternating with the rumble of enemy tanks lumbering along in the distance. But an uneasy calm pervaded, a feeling that something was about to happen.

One afternoon, Padre Niccacci sat in the little piazza outside the Cafe Minerva finishing his

Wednesday game of checkers with Luigi Brizi, the printer. Looking up from the table, he saw Emilia Cargol, Bishop Nicolini's niece, hurrying toward him. The *monsignore* wished to see him immediately, she said.

Leaving his unfinished checkers game, the padre followed Emilia through the narrow streets and alleyways that led to the bishop's palace. When Bishop Nicolini received him, something in his manner alerted the padre that this was no ordinary summons. Nodding in the direction of two other priests in the room, the *monsignore* proceeded to explain the reason for the meeting.

There had been another terrible raid. This time in the northern city of Trieste. A young Italian Jew, Giorgio Kropf, one of twenty who had escaped, had appeared at the basilica that morning begging for somewhere for them to hide. Would the padre take charge of the situation?

Where would Niccacci find shelter for twenty Jews in Assisi? Most of the people in this little hilltown had never even seen a Jew, much less hidden one.

The bishop continued. There was the matter of preparing false papers for the Jews. The Germans were checking all travelers for identity cards now. False IDs would have to be prepared for everyone. The bishop announced that he was appointing Padre Niccacci chairman of Assisi's committee to aid Jews.

* * *

Late that night, a silent assemblage of exhausted Jewish refugees trudged up the steep steps leading to the Cloister of the Sisters of Saint Clare, who had agreed to house the refugees in their hostel. At the gate stood Padre Niccacci, welcoming each person who passed through.

Once inside, the people were taken to their rooms, while Giorgio Kropf waited at a reception desk in the darkened hallway. Next to him, the padre went over details of his plan with Sister Amata, one of the few nuns permitted to speak with anyone from outside the convent.

Then came the request Padre Niccacci had dreaded. Sister Amata was asking Giorgio to collect the Jews' identity cards. There were none, the padre announced.

But this was the law, Sister Amata argued. The police would be checking the guest book for names and identification papers. The mother abbess would have to be consulted.

Holding his ground, Padre Niccacci demanded to speak with Mother Giuseppina, the cloister abbess. A few minutes later, the priest was peering through a tiny, double-grilled window. On the other side sat the mother abbess. This was her closest contact with the outside world. For the second time, Padre Niccacci explained the presence of the refugees and the reason for their lack of ID papers.

Mother Giuseppina listened attentively, her hands tightly clasped. At last she spoke, giving

her word that the Jews would be protected at all costs. The abbess promised that the nuns would take a vow of secrecy, revealing nothing of the whereabouts of the twenty refugees. The Jews would be housed and properly fed and attended to for as long as their stay at the cloister was required.

The abbess had but one request. Would the padre explain it all to the sisters? Except for those who served the reception hall and the guest rooms, the Clares were monastic, having had no contact with worldly events since the moment they took their vows. Would Niccacci explain to them about the Nazis and the Germans and the Jews?

A short time later, Padre Niccacci addressed the sisters as they gathered in the convent chapel. He told the nuns about the Nazis, reminding them that God had commanded Saint Francis give comfort and shelter to the outcast lepers of his day. He suggested that here was a divine opportunity to embrace the persecuted victims of the present-day world. By coming to the aid of twenty Jewish refugees, they would be following in the steps of the saint himself.

As the vesper bells rang softly in the chapel tower, the Cloister of the Sisters of Saint Clare, shaken by the news they had just heard, solemnly took their vows of secrecy and silence.

On a Sunday, as Bishop Nicolini conducted mass at the Basilica of Saint Francis, there was

a rustling at the back of the church. Glancing in the direction of the commotion, he and the other priests at the altar were shocked by what they saw. There, at the entrance, stood a German officer. As everyone in the basilica sat in stunned silence, the officer presented his demands. Arnaldo Fortini, the mayor of Assisi, and Bishop Nicolini were to report to Captain Stolmann at headquarters.

Who was Captain Stolmann? Mayor Fortini asked the officer. And where was headquarters?

Across the piazza, the officer answered. At the Hotel Subasio.

From his stance at the altar, the bishop spotted Padre Nicacci and directed him to accompany the mayor to the hotel. Then, he defiantly stepped to the pulpit and addressed his congregation.

As the padre and Fortini moved outside, they struggled to take in what they saw. Just yards away was a German panzer tank, its gun aimed at the sacred basilica.

Minutes later, the two were ushered into the old hotel, its lobby swarming with German officers. The peaceful hilltown of Assisi had, within one brief hour, been overtaken without the firing of a single shot.

Ordering the two men to follow him, the lieutenant proceeded to the room that had been designated as the headquarters for Stadtkommissar Hauptmann Ernst Stolmann, commandant of the town of Assisi.

Stolmann described the German takeover and

delivered his ultimatum: Under penalty of death, the people of Assisi would relinquish all arms within twenty-four hours, a night curfew would be in effect from dusk to dawn, and any act of sabotage or interference with the military would result in execution.

Then, the final order was announced: Twelve citizens were to be brought to headquarters the following morning as hostages. In the event of any unpleasant encounter or attack upon the military presence, three hostages would be executed for each German life that was lost.

Hostages? Delivered by the mayor of the sacred town of Assisi, a man decorated by the great Mussolini himself, a loyal Fascist who had marched on Rome during the 1922 takeover and had ruled Assisi for twenty-one years?

The three men eyed one another silently. Finally, the commandant spoke. By the way, were there any Jews living in Assisi? And if so, how many?

The twenty Jews who had gone into hiding at the Cloister of the Sisters of Saint Clare had come from all over Europe.

There was Edward Gelb and his wife, Mathilde, and their three daughters, Deborah, Hella, and Hanna. They were Yugoslavs who had fled to Trieste when the Nazis had overrun their country. Gelb's father had grown up in Poland and later sought a better life in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Giulio Kropf and his wife were Viennese, Paolo Jozsa

was Hungarian, and the rest, including Rita and Otto Maionica, were northern Italians.

They were a mixed group, ranging in age from very young to very old. They came from many different backgrounds and interests: One was a physician, another a rabbi, and still another a young artist. But they all shared a common enemy, Nazi Germany.

And now that enemy was in Assisi, its soldiers patrolling every corner, every piazza, every alleyway, its tanks and guns aimed at the holiest of shrines. How safe were they in the cloister? How long could the sisters, the padre, and the bishop hold out against such powerful forces?

On the morning after the German commandant issued his demands, Mayor Fortini handed in his resignation. Infuriated, the Germans carried out their first raid.

As fresh troops arrived from Perugia, Foligno, and other Italian bases, SS and Gestapo units surrounded the town of Assisi. They set up roadblocks and spread out to all parts of the town, searching for Jews.

Soon, there was the shouting of orders, the clash of boots on stairways and steps, the banging of rifle butts on doors and windows. Hearing the clamor and realizing what was happening, Padre Niccacci raced to the cloister, demanding to see the mother abbess. "Open the sanctuary!" the padre shouted as he pounded on the grilled door. A second later, the abbess appeared at the small window.

"Open this sanctuary?" she declared. Those sacred chambers had remained closed for more than seven hundred years. And they would not be opened now!

Leaving the mother abbess, the padre ran down the stairway and headed for the bishop's palace. Ducking down one alleyway and then another, he reached the palace and hurriedly told the *monsignore* what was happening. Together, the two worked their way toward the cloister, where the bishop ordered the abbess to open the sanctuary to let the Jews inside. Still she refused.

Suddenly they heard the march of heavy boots on the cobblestones of the piazza outside. Then the clanging of the huge iron gates as they were forced open. Orders were shouted and then the voice of Sister Amata was heard as she struggled to keep her post at the little reception desk downstairs.

Hearing the commotion, at last the mother abbess turned the locks on the grilled door. One, then another, and then another, until finally the door swung open. The padre ran to the rooms where the Jews had gathered. Seeing the frantic warning on his face, they quickly followed him down the hallway toward the sanctuary. As the last Jew passed through the grilled door, it clanged shut, the bolts thrown into place. And the Sisters of Saint Clare renewed their sacred vows of secrecy and silence.

* * *

Since the day of the German occupation of Assisi, hundreds of fresh troops had arrived, taking their stations in and about the town and setting up barricades at all points of entry. German officers were everywhere.

Throughout northern Italy, the Nazis continued to take control of villages, towns, and cities, and the hunt for Jews was their main objective. With each passing day, the numbers of Italian citizens, priests, and nuns involved in rescue efforts increased. In monasteries, convents, and homes, an estimated forty thousand Jews had found refuge from the enemy.

Padre Niccacci lost no time finding additional hiding places for the stream of refugees that were arriving in Assisi almost daily, disguising themselves as Catholics making pilgrimages to the holy city. The cloistered Sisters of Saint Colette and a group of German nuns who had once run a guest house had agreed to open their doors. And, in addition to a number of rooms at the seminary, there were numerous shrines and holy places dotting the hillsides outside of town that could provide shelter if the need arose.

For the moment, the most-critical problem facing the padre was that of finding identification papers for refugees trying to escape from the country. Many church officials like Cardinal della Costa of Florence had organized rescue networks to transport hundreds of Jews to Switzerland and elsewhere. But proper identification papers were

essential. Who in Assisi could provide those papers?

Late one November afternoon, as the padre finished his weekly game of checkers with Luigi Brizi, the idea came to him. Brizi was the perfect candidate. He was the finest engraver and printer in all of Umbria. The question was, would he do it? Would he be willing to take the risk? And could he be trusted?

Late that night, in the print shop on the Via Santa Chiara, Brizi and the padre sat hunched over a foot-operated press next to shelves filled with metal letter blocks.

The padre waited anxiously for Brizi to speak. Would he be able to copy the ID cards the bishop had collected from Catholic refugees now hiding in the palace? And what about the official government stamps and emblems?

The stamps and the wording of the IDs would be no problem, Luigi said. But the engraving of provincial emblems would present a challenge. The work was so intricate, so fine. Rather like the engravings on the lire, which only a skilled counterfeiter could match. It would be difficult, the printer said. But it was worth the gamble. Luigi Brizi would enjoy making fools out of the Fascists.

Brizi went to work with zeal and energy. Hour after hour passed as he bent over his printer's blocks, adjusting the type, experimenting with a score of engravings, and holding his proofs to the

light, looking for flaws that would fail close examination.

At last he was satisfied. Pulling a sample ID from the press, he studied it carefully, his skilled eye tracing each line, each curve and swirl, and then passed it to Niccacci. It was going to work.

With Brizi firmly committed to the task of producing the false identification papers, Nicacci organized a staff that would put the finishing touches on each one. Setting up quarters in the Cloister of the Sisters of Saint Clare, he enlisted the aid of several of the Jewish refugees. Within days after the printing of the first sample, hundreds of false papers had been issued, each bearing the genius of Luigi Brizi, master counterfeiter.

Toward the end of November, Padre Niccacci received a summons from Cardinal della Costa, Archbishop of Florence. Arriving in Florence early one morning, he was shocked by what he saw. Everywhere he looked, there were German troops, Gestapo, and SS units speeding down the streets on motorcycles, and armored vans carrying screaming children. Loudspeakers shouted orders above the din of passing vehicles. "*Achtung! Attenzione!* Everyone out in the street! Carry nothing with you!"

As the padre walked to the cardinal's palace, he passed in front of a building surrounded by scores of SS and Gestapo officers. Seconds later,

a number of Jewish men and women emerged from the entrance, pushed from behind by additional troops, their rifle butts buried in the backs of the prisoners. The last to leave was a priest.

Blindly, the padre pushed himself on toward the palace. Once inside, he was greeted by the cardinal's secretary, who was obviously distraught. The raid had come without warning and hundreds had been arrested. Cardinal della Costa had been trying to negotiate the release of some of the prisoners, but it was useless.

Nicacci told of what he had just witnessed, as the *monsignore* listened intently. Finally, he spoke.

The tall, young man with the heavy black beard that Padre Niccacci had seen being taken away by the Nazis must have been Nathan Cassuto, the chief rabbi of Florence; and the priest was Don Leto Casisi. They and the others were members of a group that had been active in finding hiding places for Jews.

Later that day, Cardinal della Costa returned, exhausted. More than one thousand men, women, and children had been deported, he told Niccacci. And fifty of the orphans at the Convent of the Carmine Sisters . . . had been taken. Only two little babies had been saved.

The rescue effort must continue, the bishop vowed to Niccacci. New escape routes must be established to replace those already sealed off. Cardinal della Costa told the padre he had seen Brizi's work several days before and was as-

tounded by its quality. Jewish refugees from Perugia carrying Brizi's documents on their journey to Florence had passed through several checkpoints with no difficulty. They were now in hiding at the Monastery of San Marco.

As Cardinal della Costa saw it, Assisi was the perfect location for the center of an underground counterfeiting network. With the proper identification papers, refugees could be smuggled through the town and across the front lines into Switzerland. Hundreds of lives could be saved.

Padre Niccacci thought for a moment. An undertaking such as this would require much planning and organizing. He would need more people to process the IDs, Brizi would have to have help, and they'd need to find more hiding places. Six of Assisi's monasteries had already opened their doors to the Jews, and twenty more in the area would have to be called upon to provide temporary shelter. But there was no choice.

Then the cardinal gave the padre some better news. Authorities at the Vatican had persuaded the Germans to turn Assisi into a hospital and rehabilitation facility for wounded Army officers. Stadtkommissar Stolmann would be replaced by a lieutenant colonel by the name of Valentin Müller. He was a Catholic. And a physician.

Lieutenant Colonel Müller arrived in Assisi two weeks before Christmas and immediately went about the reorganization of the Hotel Subasio into a convalescent hospital. Soon, he was a fa-

miliar face on Sunday mornings, attending mass at the Basilica of Saint Francis and later strolling through the streets of the town. The residents agreed that the new *commandante* was a great improvement over the last.

A steady stream of *pilgrims* now poured into Assisi by foot, arriving at night from hiding places in the surrounding mountains. As Niccacci had promised, monasteries throughout the area opened their doors to all who sought shelter. With each new group, the risk of discovery mounted. At any time, another raid could occur, monasteries and homes might be searched, and Brizi's counterfeit operation uncovered. With each passing day, the number of people aware of the underground activities grew, increasing the possibility of a slipup.

On Christmas Day, 1943, the colonel's limousine arrived at the Seminary of San Damiano with a large package for Padre Rufino Niccacci — a case of Moselle wine with a note wishing the padre a Merry Christmas and offering Colonel Müller's services if ever the need arose. And for the people of Assisi, he promised extra food rations to celebrate the holy season.

Within weeks of Colonel Müller's arrival, tensions about the town eased, and the padre gave permission to those Jews who spoke Italian without accents to move about the area. With their new identification cards, the refugees were now free to acquire their own food rations, and many began attending mass on Sundays, having been

coached by the padre to recite the prayers of the church. To the townspeople and the Germans alike, they were simply Catholic pilgrims from the south, seeking refuge in the holy city of Saint Francis.

On New Year's Day, Padre Niccacci was told by the bishop that a group of refugees was to be taken across the Sangro River, to an Allied encampment near Abruzzi. The group, traveling south from Florence, had been sent by the cardinal. The padre's assignment was to take them as far as the little village of Pescocostanzo, where they would be met by smugglers who would escort them across the river and into the safety of Allied hands.

At first, Niccacci refused. He wasn't a smuggler. He was a priest and a monk. And what about volunteers from Florence?

They had been caught, the bishop answered. Now the cardinal needed new people. And a different route.

Niccacci paced the floor. How would he transport these people? All trains to Abruzzi had been canceled.

The padre would find a way, Bishop Nicolini answered.

Early the next morning, seventeen Jewish refugees dressed in monks' robes climbed into a German military transport truck. With them, already in the front seat, sat Padre Rufino Niccacci, prayer book in hand. Next to him, a young German corporal waited at the wheel. The motor

started, the doors clanged shut, and two German soldiers armed with rifles took their places in the rear. The padre managed a tense smile. The colonel's offer of assistance had not been forgotten.

After a journey of several hours, with Niccacci pulling out his rosary at each checkpoint, the truck carrying the seventeen *pilgrims* (one a Catholic priest) and three Germans arrived in Pescocostanzo. Pulling up to the door of a little church, the corporal parked, got out with the other soldiers, and started assisting everyone out of the truck. Suddenly, the corporal knelt before a rabbi dressed as a *monsignore*, bowed his head, and asked for a blessing. Startled, Padre Niccacci reached for his rosary once again and began fingering the beads. But the rabbi had done his homework. Without a change of expression, he held his hand over the corporal's head, made the sign of the cross, and said perfectly, "I bless you, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Moments later, the Germans drove off, promising to return the following morning to take the padre back to Assisi. A priest ushered the men into a room at the side of the church where a small meal had been prepared. Then, as they were eating, one of the smugglers appeared in the doorway and came toward them, demanding his money.

The padre was not pleased. To ensure the safety of his charges, he argued that the smugglers would receive their pay *after* the delivery of the refugees to the Allies.

But the smuggler was firm. The money, six thousand lire, paid in advance, or no trip.

He had money, but *not* six thousand lire! Just then, the vesper bells began to ring and people started filing into the church for mass. Suddenly Niccacci had an idea — he would take up a collection for the homeless war refugees.

Late that evening, having climbed a dark, winding path that led up into the mountains outside of town, the padre and the others followed Luigi and Vittorio, the two smugglers, to a forester's hut. There, the men warmed themselves before starting the long trek down the trail leading to the Sangro River. Luigi and Vittorio took their places in front of the group with two donkeys that would be used to carry food and provisions back from the Allies. The padre stayed behind in the hut to wait.

Hour after hour dragged by. Finally, toward dawn, the signal came. A single shot ringing out through the night. Vittorio and the Jewish refugees had made it!

The next afternoon, the padre returned to the seminary to find an SS officer pacing back and forth in front of the basilica. Introducing himself as Captain Ernst van den Velde, he explained that he had just been assigned the command of all security for the surrounding region and wanted to meet the civilian and religious leaders in the area.

Then, refusing an offer of hospitality from the padre, the captain abruptly continued. Was the padre aware of the heavy smuggling taking place in the area? Merchandise. And people. Deserters, refugees from the north. And Jews. Niccacci shrugged. How would *he* know about such things?

Van den Velde issued his parting comment. All routes leading in and out of Assisi would be closely watched. There would be no further escapes and no new *pilgrims* seeking the holy shrines of Saint Francis.

During the weeks that followed, the weather turned bitter cold. The stream of refugees to the holy shrines diminished to a trickle after the closing of a number of routes to the north and south.

One day, an underground scout on a mission to Pescocostanzo returned with tragic news. In a surprise raid by the Gestapo, Luigi, the smuggler, had been shot and killed, and the old forester captured and sent to a concentration camp. Only Vittorio had escaped. The final road to freedom had been clamped shut, just as van den Velde had promised.

A short time later, four of the Jewish refugees from the San Damiano Seminary were arrested while transporting counterfeit identification cards to Perugia. Interrogated and tortured, they refused to break, revealing nothing about the activities of the Assisi underground.

Late one night, as the padre returned by foot from a visit with his family in Deruta, he found

Captain van den Velde's Volkswagen in the seminary driveway. It was time for a little drive, the captain said with an artificial smile. Perhaps the padre would be interested in a tour of the Gestapo headquarters at Bastia.

After relentless questioning in van den Velde's office, Padre Niccacci was taken to a tiny, medieval cell in the basement of the Bastia headquarters. The area was cold, dank, and foul-smelling. A narrow cot was against the stone wall. In the corner was a tin bucket. Above, a light shone from a bare bulb in the ceiling.

For days, Padre Niccacci remained in this cell. He was denied food and water, and the heavy bars and the door in front of them remained locked. Outside in the courtyard, he could hear the rhythmic steps of guards pacing back and forth, and occasionally the sound of a Gestapo van entering or leaving the prison. The light above his cot stayed on day and night, making it impossible to sleep.

Late one night, Niccacci heard his name shouted and saw the bolts to the cell door turning one by one. In an instant, a guard was by his cot, a rifle butt in his back. "Move!" the guard ordered.

In the courtyard outside, a truck waited, and the padre and a number of other prisoners were hustled on board. Dazed, hungry, and weak, he clutched the side of the truck to steady himself, for there was no room to sit down. And then he

heard the word he most dreaded. Perugia. He was going to be executed.

Shortly after five o'clock the next morning, the truck pulled into Carcere Femminile, a former women's prison. Padre Niccacci stared incredulously at the scene before him. Here in the walled courtyard of an ancient prison, the condemned waited to die. Five at a time, the men were shoved against the side of the building, the order given, the shots fired. The words of the Requiem passed his lips. And then, the mercy of darkness.

Minutes later, the padre found himself in an interrogation room with van den Velde shouting at him. Was he going to confess at last? Through the door came two emaciated prisoners. Niccacci looked into their hollow eyes, barely recognizing the Jewish refugees, Paolo Jozsa and Giorgio Kropf. The padre asked for water but it was denied. And then the interrogations resumed.

Hours later, the padre opened his eyes to find a nun standing by his cot. In her hands he saw a glass of milk and a small bowl of soup. Sitting down beside him, the woman held the glass while he drank. Then she fed him the soup, spoonful by spoonful.

Shortly after, a man entered the cell, introducing himself as a lawyer who had come to defend him. A trial, Niccacci mused. Why not just get on with the execution?

The lawyer began to explain. A close friend in Assisi had asked him to intervene in the padre's

case because of his connections with Field-Marshal Kesselring, the Supreme Commander of German occupational forces in Italy. Would the padre know his friend, perhaps? The former mayor of Assisi, Arnaldo Fortini?

It was some time before the priest could comprehend the lawyer's words. His head and body ached with the events of the past weeks. What about Paolo and Giorgio and the others? And the refugees in Assisi. What had become of them after his arrest?

Paolo's and Giorgio's papers were in the hands of the German chief judge for the province of Perugia, the lawyer said. Perhaps, there wouldn't be a trial at all.

Later that day, Padre Niccacci walked out into the clean fresh air of a winter's day. Frail, drawn, and looking much older than his years, he was nevertheless a free man. Once more, he offered his silent thanksgiving for the Lord's grace. His lawyer was Barone Vincenzo Texeira, a man of professional prestige and of a noble Italian family. He was indeed "well-connected" and was working with men of influence, Germans in high places. They were eager to save their skins the moment armistice was declared, for it became clearer with each passing day that the Third Reich was losing ground.

The gray days of a northern Italian winter gave way at last to spring. After mass each morning, Padre Niccacci took his hourly stroll along the

cloistered garden of the Seminary of San Damiano. It had been a long time since he had walked to Assisi. After Don Brunacci's warning of van den Velde's determination to flush out the Assisi underground, he had stayed at the seminary, relying on visitors to keep him informed of the refugees.

It was on a stroll such as this that the priest was startled one morning to hear the rumble of a military Volkswagen as it crossed the pebbled driveway leading to the seminary's entrance. Certain that it was van den Velde, Niccacci expected the worst.

The car door opened and slammed shut, and the young driver, wearing the black armband of an interpreter for the German Command in Perugia ran toward the cloister. It was Giorgio!

Barone Texeira had lost no time in pressing the German chief judge to act on the cases of the four Jewish refugees. In a review of the files, a decision was made that all evidence against the men would be dropped. Learning that Giorgio and Paolo spoke German with ease, the judge had decided that they could be useful. The two men were now interpreters at the German army headquarters in Perugia.

Late in April, Paolo Jozsa returned to the seminary with a surprise for the padre. Using his influence at German headquarters, he had gained access to some blank official papers, stamped with the official seal of the Supreme Commander, Field-Marshal Kesselring. Drawing upon his ex-

periences in working with Brizi's counterfeit IDs, Paolo had typed a forged edict declaring Assisi an open city. Evacuation of all German tanks, artillery, and military personnel was to take effect immediately.

On June 17, 1944, Padre Niccacci and the brothers of the sacred Seminary of San Damiano awakened early to the roar of tanks moving in the direction of Assisi. Grabbing their robes, the men ran downstairs and out to the highway. The tanks were coming from the south, and with ordered precision were inching their way toward the hilltown. Two weeks before, on June 4, the Allies had liberated Rome. Less than forty-eight hours later, the invasion of Normandy had begun. And now, Assisi.

As if on cue, church bells began to ring. Soon, the entire area was echoing with the bells of all the sacred shrines.

And then, from the houses and convents and monasteries throughout the town, the people came, with armloads of flowers and loaves of bread for the advancing troops. And from their hiding places poured the Jewish refugees. The British had arrived in Assisi.

Throngs of people were moving toward the center of the town and the priests of San Damiano joined with them. Entering the Basilica of Saint Francis, Padre Niccacci and the others heard a new sound rising above the roar of the tanks and

the bells. Music, coming from the second floor. In the organ loft, with the basilica's loudspeakers turned on for all the town to hear, sat Maestro Fano, his yarmulke on his head and his monk's robes billowing out behind him, playing "God Save the King," the British national anthem.