
E I G H T E E N

The Vatican

“What I need to do is get to Rome,” I said out loud in a voice of triumph as the idea formulated in my mind. “There, I can secure the proof I need for the children’s identities if my plan works.”

It was early morning when the answer woke me out of a sound sleep. It came to me that I had an ace up my sleeve because of my father. Thanks to Monsieur Franck’s vanity, I had been baptized at the Vatican. When you are baptized at Saint Peter’s, you have the right to ask for an audience with the pope. My father had done precious little good for me during my life, but in this instance he had done me a good turn that I could convert to a great turn for many unfortunates.

The first obstacle was to devise a way to get to Rome without putting myself in danger of getting caught by

the Nazis. I decided to call my friend Pierre, the owner of the limousine service in Beausoleil. I went upstairs to the Van Hof's to ask to use their phone. I called, and Pierre's secretary told me he was out of the office.

"Please have him call Marc at the Van Hof home," I said and gave her the number.

"Have some breakfast with us, Marc," Madame Van Hof offered as soon as I put the phone down.

As we were eating, another idea came to me. I could call Maurice Chevalier, the legendary entertainer. I had his telephone number from a previous encounter when I had hidden in the cellar at his home in Juan-les-Pins, an hour or so down the coast.

Chevalier's valet answered. "Mr. Chevalier is in the sauna and cannot be disturbed," he said.

"Will you give him a message for me?"

"If that is your wish, I will pass him a message," he responded coldly.

"This is very urgent. Do you understand?" I retorted, adopting a superior tone. "Do me the service of calling him to the phone right away. Tell him that it's Marc, the son of Monsieur Franck, the owner of the Knickerbocker in Monte Carlo. I thank you to get him immediately."

Within minutes, I was on the phone with Mr. Chevalier. I explained to him the precarious situation of these Jewish children and my pressing need to get to Rome. He was horrified at the plight of these youngsters.

"Can you get some time free to escort me to the Vatican under your protection? I know you have all the

necessary exit visas, and I can provide the limousine and driver," I told him, assuming that Pierre would help me.

"Certainly, my dear young man, I will work it out. How much time will we need?" he asked.

"One or two weeks, I'm really not sure," I said. "I have all the funds we need furnished by the British government."

"*Mais non, mais non,*" he replied. "I'll take care of the expenses."

"Monsieur, it is already taken care of. Thank you for your great kindness and good heart. These children must be saved. If it is convenient for you, I will send a limousine to pick you up about one o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

"I believe that will be fine," he said. "If I cannot change my schedule to accommodate that particular time, how shall I contact you?"

"Just leave a message with Pierre Embalier at his limousine company in Beausoleil. He will know how to get in touch with me."

I hung up and tried Pierre again. He still hadn't returned.

"Claude, would you like to walk to Beausoleil with me? I have an errand to do near the Pâtisserie Pasquier."

"Yes, that will be nice." Then the phone rang.

"It's for you," Claude said. "It's Monsieur Pierre."

"Marc, what can I do for you?" Pierre asked.

"What I need is a limousine and a chauffeur for a week or two. I need coupons for gas that are good in

Italy and exit visas and papers. Maurice Chevalier will be the person on the lease agreement, but I will be taking care of the expenses. He'll be waiting at his home in Juan-les-Pins for the limo at one P.M. tomorrow. Will that be possible, Pierre?"

"Absolutely. I have a trustworthy driver and limousine available. I will have him at Monsieur Chevalier's at one P.M. with all necessary papers.

"Now, on another subject, young man," Pierre continued, and his tone turned emotional. "I told Cécile of your last visit, and she felt bad that she didn't have the opportunity to see you. Do me the pleasure of coming to our home this evening for dinner. She is dying to see you and hold you in her arms. You know, we both love you so much. You are the son we couldn't have. Do you remember when you were little? You would walk with your tutor on the avenue des Spélugues and through the gardens of the Casino. You never missed stopping at our travel agency to say hello and give your regards to Cécile. You were always so polite and respectful, she couldn't get over it. She would always talk about you. 'I wish we could have a little boy, like Marc,' she would say over and over again.

"I told her that I saw you after you quit dental school, and that you looked so grown up and debonair. I promised her that when I heard from you again, I would bring you home for a visit. It would please her so much to see you. Will you stop by the garage to get me around four or five? Is that possible, or do you already have plans? It would make her so happy to see you, to see

the man you have become. You know, she hasn't seen you since you were seven years old."

Though slightly embarrassed by what he had said, I agreed to come over. I hung up and told Claude that I didn't need to do the errand after all. I explained the plan to them both, and he asked his mother to pray for its smooth execution. His mother was a charming woman from Holland. She was in the same line of work as I. She helped Jewish refugees on their route of escape to North Africa, across the Pyrénées, or through Sweden by boat to Great Britain. I had known the Van Hofs before I was sequestered with the Jesuits in Nice. They lived in Monte Carlo on the route to the Palm Beach Club, where my tutor would take me twice a week for tennis lessons. She and her daughter, Dominique, about ten years older than I, showered me with love when I was little.

After visiting with the Van Hofs for a while, I got my things together for the trip and then headed over to Pierre's garage from where he drove us home. When we arrived, Cécile was on the front steps of their villa. She broke out in tears as she ran to the car. She opened the passenger door and jumped back in shock. She couldn't believe her eyes. "This can't be Marc, Pierre!" I got out of the car. "He's a grown man! But . . . yes it is. Now, I see his mother's charming smile, his mother whom we love so much. Come, come into my arms, Marc," she said with tears rolling down her cheeks. I did, and she held me. "Thank you, thank you for coming today." We

had a lovely talk over dinner, remembering the old days and filling each other in on what had happened since I had left in 1930. After dinner, Cécile said, "I'm sorry there is no coffee available, as I'm sure you know, but let's enjoy a good cognac or eau-de-vie together."

We continued our conversation well into the evening, and then they drove me back to the apartment.

The following afternoon just before one o'clock, there was a knock on the door of my parents' apartment. It was Claude. "Monsieur Chevalier is on the phone for you." I followed him upstairs to their apartment.

"The limo has arrived, but I'm not quite ready," he said. "Can you wait awhile longer to begin our adventure?" he asked in his cheerful way.

"I'll be ready whenever you arrive, monsieur."

"I should be in Monte Carlo by three o'clock. I'll pick you up at Saint Roman, if that's all right with you. The address is 52 boulevard d'Italie, correct?"

"Yes. Just have the chauffeur ring the bell at apartment D."

Before three o'clock, the doorbell rang. The driver took my suitcases, and I followed.

The car that Pierre had leased to Monsieur Chevalier was an exquisite Delage limousine. It had a unique aerodynamic line that I had never seen before. It must have been a special edition or an extremely limited series. The chauffeur's roof was retractable. I had only seen that once before in a Voisin. The roof of the back of the car

was a landau, a convertible top. The interior was of precious woods and of mohair, a fabric of exceptional quality that was pleated and padded. There was a bar and an icebox as well. The carpeting was thick and luxurious, almost covering the shoes of Monsieur Chevalier, who smiled as I got in.

“You’ll excuse me, my friend. I seem to have caught a terrible cold last night, and I can hardly talk.” His voice had become low and raspy since I had talked to him earlier. “Please give the chauffeur our itinerary, won’t you?”

“Of course, monsieur. Take the route toward Sospel via the Col de Tende. You’ll cross the border and continue on through the tunnel. As you exit, you’ll descend toward Limone where I made reservations for the night at the Hôtel de la Gare.”

Monsieur Chevalier slept for the few hours it took us to get there. We were not asked for any papers at either the French or Italian customs. The border guards just looked at the car in awe. I carried personal papers saying I was Michel Carbonell, a textile salesman, but they were really more interested in the car than in us or our papers.

At the hotel, once we had signed the registration, Monsieur Chevalier went straight to his room without dining. He was feeling quite sick, but when we met the next morning he felt much better. After breakfast, we took the road in the direction of Torino, passing through Cuneo. We stopped for lunch at a small restaurant in Moncalieri where we enjoyed a fine little meal. The restaurant owner was a *garde de chasse* (hunting guard) of a private reserve in Valdieri for the king, Victor Emmanuel III. We had a

delicious ragout of *chevreuil au vin rouge* (venison prepared in red wine) with *champignons des bois* (wild mushrooms). We didn't ask any questions about where the meat came from but appreciated the meal immensely. Monsieur Chevalier was still hungry and asked for a second portion. He had a big appetite. The chauffeur didn't finish his and didn't seem thrilled with the food. He probably didn't like game.

I had made reservations in Torino at a hotel I knew well, the Albergo Principi di Piemonte. My tutor and I had stayed there when I was a child. There was a fabulous view of all Torino. The surrounding mountaintops were covered with snow. It brought back wonderful memories of the times I spent with my colonel, and I felt a profound gratefulness that he exposed me to such wonderful experiences. He was such a benevolent man, always desiring the best for others. He gave me a wonderful example of manhood to emulate.

Mr. Chevalier appreciated the hotel. We had dinner looking out on the mountains that encircled the city. The next day, we took the road in the direction of Florence, Mr. Chevalier's favorite city. He was feeling well again and had completely recovered his voice.

Once in Florence, he gave the driver directions to his favorite restaurant. I'll never forget the experience, though I don't remember the restaurant's name. He ordered for us, not even asking what we wanted, so confident was he in its fine cuisine. The owner was a cousin of a celebrated restaurant owner in Rome named Alfredo alla Scrofa, who was known for his specialty, *fettuccine*

alla Scrofa. His cousin mixed the pasta at tableside with butter and egg yolks that beautifully coated the fettuccine, and then added fresh cream. Just before serving this dish, he grated cheese on the top.

“This restaurant is very special to the Italians,” Chevalier told me. “The owner had a serving spoon and a fork in twenty-four-carat gold that he always used to mix the fettuccine tableside. At the time Italy declared war and began the attack against Ethiopia in 1936, Mussolini gathered wedding bands from the people to finance the cost of the invasion. The proprietor of this restaurant contributed by donating these massive utensils of pure gold to the Italian cause. Another of his specialties is angel-hair pasta made with octopus in its own ink covered with a delightful sea urchin sauce. You must try it. We’ll get an order of this dish as well,” Chevalier said with obvious appreciation. He was right. I never forgot this dish, and to this day, I never go to a Japanese restaurant without ordering *uni*, sea urchin sushi. I never miss an opportunity to eat sea urchin.

After our meal, we went to the hotel. Once we checked in, Chevalier said, “Marc, will you ask the concierge to make reservations tomorrow at the Excelsior in Rome, a two-bedroom suite for us and a standard room for the chauffeur?”

The Excelsior was an exquisite hotel. I called the Vatican from our room to let them know of my arrival in Rome. I talked to one of the pope’s secretaries who said he would call back with the day and time of my audience.

“Let’s dine in the suite tonight, if you don’t mind.

I'm a bit tired from the trip, and I'd rather not have to make conversation with anyone who might recognize me," Mr. Chevalier suggested. We completed the fine dinner with calvados, and after some conversation we both went to our bedrooms.

Several days later, I received a message from the Vatican that my audience with the pope would be the following afternoon.

The next day, the chauffeur drove me to Vatican City. We stopped at the gates where the guards verified my appointment. Once inside, we drove on the cobblestone street until we reached the entrance. It was an entire city inside that included a railroad station for the pope's use, a post office, an observatory, a gift shop, and other buildings. I was received by a priest who escorted me to a waiting room where others were also waiting.

The silence was deafening, almost suffocating. People spoke only in hushed voices. The ambience was austere and cold. A priest came in and took me to another room for those specifically waiting to see the pope. There, the skirts of the women were measured, and material was pinned on if they were not long enough. Their heads had to be covered with a scarf before entering. After a while, I was escorted to yet another room and eventually to a final one where I was the only person waiting.

"You are to enter and kneel before the pope on a pillow that you will see," the priest told me. "Then approach in silence, stop in front of him, and kiss his

ring. There will be an armchair for you to sit on. Sit down and wait to be addressed.”

Finally, I was instructed to enter. I followed the directions I had been given. All was very ornate, including the very heavy draperies. The room was dimly lit. The pope, dressed in his impressive robes, looked gaunt and rather frail to me. His secretary was next to him to take notes. The pope asked me the purpose of my visit. I was able to state my goal in French because he was fluent in the language. He was receptive and listened attentively, then granted my request. The audience itself lasted only about fifteen minutes though the preliminary protocol had seemed endless.

We were called the following week to return to the Vatican to pick up the documents. It was raining hard, so I decided to wait in the car. I sent the chauffeur to the office to get the papers. It took him quite a few trips to bring the three thousand certificates to the limousine.

The baptismal certificates were printed in French by the Vatican printers as we had requested. Names and birth dates of the children would later be written in ink by each parish priest. After the chauffeur finished loading the documents, we returned to the hotel.

A few days later when we arrived back at Juan-les-Pins, I sincerely thanked Mr. Chevalier, telling him how indispensable his help was to the success of the plan.

“Glad to be of service, monsieur,” he said with that unforgettable smile lighting up his face.

Later in life, when I held the position of executive chef at a famous hotel in Kansas City, Missouri, who should come to see Mae West's performance at our cabaret but Mr. Chevalier himself. It was my pleasure to fête him and to inform Ms. West of his help in the successful rescue of so many Jewish children during the war. When she came onstage, she saluted him and told the story of what he had helped me do. When she finished, she ordered champagne for everyone in the large audience and toasted Mr. Chevalier for his heroism during World War II. I know personally how much this meant to him.

When I returned to Monaco, I contacted Monsieur Paget and explained to him what we had accomplished at the Vatican. "We've successfully completed this part of the mission," I told him. "I will leave the baptismal certificates with Pierre Embalier in Beausoleil."

"I'll send someone from my office to pick them up," he said. "Thank you, Marc, for all you have accomplished."

With the plan of action for the Jewish children in place, I now had to figure out how to get back to Great Britain. I quickly decided to contact the chief of police of Monte Carlo, Commissaire Plantier. Maybe he would have some ideas. He had never failed me before.

My instincts and timing could not have been better. He knew of a Swedish diplomat who needed a chauffeur. The man's own chauffeur had suffered catastrophic gambling losses in Monte Carlo and had killed himself as a result. This was, sadly, not uncommon in my hometown.

Luck on my side as usual, the Swedish diplomat hired me as his driver, based on Commissaire Plantier's recommendation and a brief interview. I posed as his chauffeur, driving him first to Paris and then south to Biarritz, where I enjoyed a few days at the seaside while I waited for him to conclude his business. Next I drove him to Lisbon, which was the destination I needed to reach. There, I contacted the British Embassy. As things worked out, the Swedish diplomat was recalled urgently to Sweden. The British authorities arranged for my return to England by plane where I soon rediscovered the comfort and safety of Mr. Churchill's country home.

After some time back at the estate, Mr. Churchill summoned me to the library to share a cognac. We talked for quite a while, as he enjoyed his cigar and I relaxed with my pipe.

"Some of your solutions to the tasks at hand are truly original, *mon ingénieur*. Your next mission may require all your resourcefulness," he said, "and it certainly will be your most vital undertaking so far. What you'll bring back is invaluable to the ultimate survival of Great Britain."