

Today was June 12th, a pleasant Monday afternoon; and they had been here since last Sunday. The city of Rome basked today in the warm summer sunshine, and some elements of normalcy had returned after weeks of chaos, during which German forces had tried to prevent the city's fall to advancing Allies from the south.

"Where do you suppose we'll find him?"

André took his eyes from the street briefly. "I have no idea, Franki, but the Vatican seems like a good place to start."

He had used his position with Operations; and having negotiated a Jeep from the motor pool, he and Franki were finally capitalizing on an opportunity to look for their friend, Padre. As they wended their way through the streets, not altogether sure of just how to reach the Basilica, they were impressed with the lack of the war's devastation in the city. How unlike Cassino and Salerno it was. They had noted that even the bridges over the Tiber were still intact, as were the city's historic sites. In fact, it was only the rail yards that evidenced the effects of the bombings. And now his fluent command of Italian afforded André the opportunity to ask the necessary questions. That being done, they had finally queried their way to Vatican City.

And now they were walking; they had been for some time. As they threaded their way through the people, eyes scanning the crowd in search of a priest, they were in awe of the grandeur of the city's ancient architecture.

But then they saw him; he was across the street. And André looked at Franki with a nod and a shrug of his shoulders. "It's a start," he said with a smile, and he crossed over to approach the man.

“Scusa, Padre.” His Italian was that of a native. “But my friend and I are looking for a Padre Michele. Do you know him perhaps; Padre Michele Kolbuch?”

The man’s responsive expression was one of caution and distrust. His eyes narrowed as he said, “Perché?”

“He’s a friend of ours,” André explained. “From years back,” Franki added. “We knew him in Lwów, but we’ve not seen him since ... ”

“Ah ha!” And the man’s face lit up. “So *you’re* the ones!” And now he spoke English and smiled.

“Th ... the ones?” stuttered Franki.

“Yes, yes! He speaks of both of you often. Which of you is André?”

“Aah ... that would be me.”

And now the man virtually effervesced. “Please, let me shake your hand, André!” And as his clasp tightened on both of André’s hands, he studied them intensely. “So ... these are the hands that crafted that remarkable Vatican Travel Pass.”

And now he grinned even more broadly. “I’ve seen it; André. It is incredible!”

Even under his deep tan, the blush was evident as André replied. “Well, I thank you; I thank you very much. But I’m afraid our time is very limited. Do you happen to know where we might find Padre Michele at the moment?”

The man did. “Yes, I believe I know right where he may be. There is a little restaurant ... ”

It was indeed a small restaruant, a coffee house. As the three looked in through the quaint, latticed window, they could see Padre sitting alone. Their guide gestured toward the window.

“I’ll leave you with your friend,” he said. “I’ve no doubt that you have much to discuss. I would only be in the way. *Godete!*”

Inside now, and despite the war’s austerity, the atmosphere reeked of cheeses and garlic, of freshly baked bread and the heady aroma of dark Italian coffee. Padre chanced to look up and saw them, across the room and coming toward him.

“Ei, Paesani!” he shouted, the words ringing out above the murmur of the general conversation, his countenance suddenly brightening as he virtually leaped from his chair. Disregarding custom and customers alike, standing now with his hand in the air, he called for the waiter. “Ei, Cameriere! Portaci vino qui! Per favore, tre bicchieri!”

Handshakes were virtually useless; grossly inadequate to the occasion; immeasurably insufficient expressions they were of the flood of emotions that now surged through the three of them. Endless months of wondering and fearing for each other were now over. And they fell to hugging each other with uncontrolled and unabashed enthusiasm. And there were tears.

Those at other tables could only look on with curiosity; watching two Polish soldiers of the Allied Forces, clad in dusty battle fatigues, as they embraced a frocked priest with such overt affection.

Seated finally, and with glasses of bold Chianti lubricating tongues; with virtually indelible smiles on their faces and with nearly infinite information to share, they rattled away at each other for over an hour, endeavoring to erase with words the years that had separated them. The separation itself – over 4 years now – was mentioned but briefly, and thereafter seemingly endless questions flowed one upon another: How were the orphans?

How was the trip to Rome? Where were Carlo and Luigi; where was Victor? Where were Lari, Stasi, and Dani? So much had happened; so much needed to be known!

“Well, I certainly don’t have all the answers,” said the priest, “nor do I have enough. But as far as I know, Carlo and Luigi – and their families – are still in Volargne, and I’ve had some communication with Victor. Actually, he’s married now; I’m sure you didn’t know about that, and living in Mantua. He and his new young wife are operating a bar and wine-bottling shop there.”

“Really!” Franki remarked, grinning. “It’s hard to imagine Victor being married. He’s now reduced to only one woman; seems like he always had at least two.”

Curbing his amusement, Padre said, “Yes, I seem to remember him that way too. By the way, they sent me an open invita ... wait a minute!”

“What?” André was surprised at the breach in the conversation.

“They aah ... they sent me an invitation to visit, but it makes no mention of how many may respond.” An impish smirk now. “Why don’t the three of us ... ”

“YES!” Franki blurted. And people around them turned to look. “They have no idea that we’re here, do they. Let’s surprise them!”

His head nodding vigorously, André said, “Great idea, and I agree! But we’re going to have to wait. The Nazis still hold a line at the Po River. It’s their last line of defense in Italy, and the Alpine foothills beyond the plain constitute their escape route into Germany. They’ll not yield that easily.”

His face darkened now as he added, “And I can but wonder what the situation is like there – the Germans are still in control.”