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HISTORICAL

I Swear to You, Adolf Hitler, Fealty and Obedience: Sin and Retribution 2
Adalbert Lallier
Xlibris
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Four Stars (out of Five)

This World War II novel blends a seeking of justice with an exposé on the Nazi mind-set.

Drafted against his will into the Nazi Waffen-SS, Adalbert Lallier fought for three years against Yugoslav partisans and Red Army forces. In the closing weeks of the war, he witnessed his officer quite gingerly and for sport shoot seven Jewish concentration camp inmates who were digging a ditch.

I Swear to You, Adolf Hitler, Fealty and Obedience is Lallier's partially fictionalized account of that massacre, the events leading up to it, and the decades-long postwar search for justice by a child of a victim of that war crime. Though the names of the participants have been changed, the book is based on people Lallier knew, including Julius Viel, the German officer who committed the murders and whom the author, over fifty years later, finally helped bring to trial.

The construction and pacing of this work make it read not so much like a novel as a historical report—or the script for the narrator of a documentary. Writing in the third person, the author even refers to himself as Lallier in the twelve-page introduction. Although it's not credited to anyone else, this lengthy critique reads as if another party wrote it. The introduction, like the book, is replete with explorations into how and why the Germans were lured into following Hitler and carrying out the Holocaust, and it asks the mind-boggling question of "what kind of retribution would be required and morally justified" in punishing those who participated in such crimes.

Lallier familiarizes readers with not only the people in the story but also with the events and emotions that molded their characters and motivated their actions. The key victim, Bruno Lauber, is a childhood friend of the perpetrator, Karl-Johan Rainer, a "highly promising child of Vienna's haute bourgeoisie" who "had been converted into Nazism's perfect fighting machine."

Rainer's martial exploits are described in one chapter, and Lauber's trials in a concentration camp are detailed in another. When events bring them together at the ditch, both have been so scarred by years of war and abuse that neither recognizes the other.

Lallier uses the aftermath of the massacre, including the life Rainer created for himself over the next half century, to show—and to decry—how so many brutal killers publicly went through "de-Nazification" yet considered themselves, and were still treated as, heroes by their communities. The writing here is part exposé, part moral outrage, and part heartfelt remorse—and all disappointment in his fellow Germans.

Lallier also uses his story to weigh the "eye for an eye" retribution demanded by the Old Testament with modern Israel's commitment to seeking justice rather than vengeance. The character of Klara Tauber, "the only Jewish child ever to have been conceived in a Nazi concentration camp," is the catalyst for the second half of the book—which follows Klara's decades-long search to identify and bring to trial the Nazi officer who murdered her father, Bruno, and six others that day in 1945.

Although at 130 pages this is a very short book, it is also a very dense one, with German nouns and phrases on almost every page, most of which are translated or explained in footnotes. The writing is a little choppy, and while the third-person narrative style tells more than shows, Lallier manages to make his case clearly. While it bears the number "2" in the subtitle, the book stands alone from the author's previous work, which deals with the Vietnam War.

Mark McLaughlin