

“Oh, indeed they were! And for that reason the Germans had sent some of the best of their Wehrmacht to Italy. But there was also another reason for them doing that, one not so obvious. Because of General Badoglio’s surrender to the Allies on 8 September 1943, Hitler no longer trusted the Italian people, you see. So, like we talked about this morning at the meeting, like with Daniel, the handwriting was on the wall.”

“And ... ?” said Robert, echoed by Mary.

“Well, the very next month, on the thirteenth, and as though to confirm Hitler's distrust, Italy joined the Allies. And not only did Italy declare war on Germany; they also declared war with Japan.”

“So now,” and George laughed, “everybody controls Italy except the Italians.”

“*Esattamente!*” Victor exclaimed, and he laughed sarcastically. “The North of Italy was cut-off from the Italian peninsula, and the whole Valpolicella region now came to be dominated by the Nazis. Unfortunately, Mantua and Volargne were in the center of it all.”

“But what about all the Italian troops stationed with the Nazis all over the Mediterranean and Europe?” Asked Mary.

Victor replied with a long sad stare. “Italian soldiers, who were deployed to war zones, were betrayed by their own government. Except for those fortunate ones who found their way back home, back to Italy, the rest were left to be arrested, imprisoned, and even murdered by their former Wehrmacht partners.”

“Whew,” said Robert. “Just imagine being in a combat zone frontline position, and suddenly you find that your allied flank, even the man in the same foxhole with you, has suddenly become your enemy! Yikes! To me, it’s beyond conception”.

“But it happened,” said Victor with a sigh. “Aah, but no more about the war now.” Rising with an effort and stretching, he said, “Sometimes I tire of remembering it. What about lunch, Val?”

“I can do it right now. Sandwiches okay? Or that is to say: *panini imbottiti*?”

“Buono!” said Victor, smiling. “Grazie, mio amore!” ‘I tire of remembering.’

How often the aging Victor had said that. Yet tired though he would be, the memories came flooding back, persistent and inescapable; vivid in both their joys and their sorrows. Sitting in his home later that same evening, his Bible open in his lap, he looked over at Gina, sleeping so quietly in a favorite recliner. He was nearly ninety now; and the last several months had found him reflecting on the thought that perhaps it might be nice to fall asleep quietly in this war-weary world, and then, after a dreamless, timeless sleep, to awaken to a new and different world; a world at peace, where there were never any bad memories. And then his reverie was interrupted as he recalled being reunited with André and Franki after those many years. It had been back in June of 1944.

It was then he had learned that they, André and Franki, had been at Cassino; that they and their comrades of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps had struggled bitterly to capture the gutted ruins of a mountaintop monastery. Just why, neither of them could recall. Looking back it all seemed so unadulteratedly purposeless.

The aging 1,400 year-old monastery, incorrectly appraised by Allied intelligence to be a strategic German outpost, had undergone repeated bombings in February 1944. The place had thus been reduced it to a pile of unrecognizable rubble. Both men had remarked that such bombings, contrary to Allied expectations, had rendered the old abbey even more inaccessible. The huge piles of debris, which fell all around the mountaintop’s

crest, provided instant obstacles to penetration by the Allies. It provided also excellent cover from which the enemy held out, and delivered a withering fire for well over four months, until withdrawing in the middle of May. Franki had said they counted themselves fortunate to have survived; losses among their companions had been severe.



1954: Ten year anniversary at Monte Cassino commemorating the famous battles, and the destruction of the abbey. Top photo, taken by "padre" Michele, was sent to Victor in Australia. (Note crane still busy at reconstruction work.) "Padre" also sent postcard of newly built monument dedicated to fallen Polish forces.

Sitting there in his chair, staring pensively into space, he remembered also how thrilling it had been to hear from his old friend "Padre" Kolbuch. It had been at the same time of year, and the man had been in Vatican City.