

Thus, in the closing months of 1941, the matter of processing and deporting many hundreds of Jewish prisoners, shipping them to Auschwitz and Birkenau and to other death camps, became a pressing burden to an already understaffed and undermanned German garrison. And although a solution appeared to present itself in the form of *additional help*, such help failed to materialize.

All of this Victor related before saying, “You see the expected answer to the problem – the solution – had been the Italian Division, *the Leopoli Division*. The Nazi General Government had commissioned them, and they were expected to participate in this ... (He made a rolling gesture with his hand.) ... this effort to get rid of these unfortunate people.”

Robert was refilling a glass for a guest as he remarked, quite matter-of-factly, “And the Italians didn’t cooperate.”

“You bet we didn’t!” Victor snapped. “We had no issue with the Jewish people; that was Hitler’s problem; at least he imagined it was. So now the Germans there in Lwów had something of a rebellion on their hands, because the Italian soldiers had a pretty good idea of what was going on. They were not about to arrest Jews, and they wanted absolutely nothing to do with the deportations.

“You see, what had the Italians’ interest, also, was that they foresaw an imminent invasion by the Allies. It didn’t happen that way, not right away, but that’s what they were expecting. Actually, to many Italians, like to me for example, it was not so much an invasion as it was a matter of being liberated from Germany. And I’ll tell you this: when I finally learned about what had happened back in Lwów, I was furious! That liberation couldn’t come soon enough.” The group was quiet now as they waited for what would

come next. “But I wasn’t alone. The entire Italian military, throughout all of Europe, felt this same anger, this same discontented resentment of Germany.

“In Italy ... (He shook an emphatic finger.) ... “In Italy we could see everything going wrong. By the summer of ‘forty-three the Russian campaign – Germany’s invasion of Russia – was in some serious *sauerbraten*; and even the General Government was unable to supply the military with what they needed. O that poor wretched military!

“Can you believe it? Italian soldiers in Lwów were *selling weapons and ammo* to the underground – to Polish Partisans and to Jews. And why ... you ask? Couple of reasons. First, because they needed living supplies; they needed food, which the partisans were able to provide. And secondly, they probably thought it might help to end the war.”

Suddenly the old man stopped. Briefly he stared vacantly at nothing while his expression changed from one of contemptuous anger to one of deep regret. With eyes now glimmering with tears he surveyed the family and guests, each of them hanging on his every word as he said, “*Basta!* That’s enough. No more talk of the war. No more.” A great sigh now, and then: “Let’s talk about something nice; let’s talk about ... how about racing – Formula 1 racing? The boys and I were talking about Nuvolari just a few days ago. Now there was a driver! Probably the world’s greatest ever! Their grandfather knew him, you know.” And the conversation went on for another hour.

Had Victor continued regarding the war, he would have said that July 25th, 1943, saw the end of fascism in Italy. The 20 years of enchantment with IL Duce Mussolini’s fascist government had reached its end. He would have told of Mussolini’s arrest by order

of King Victor Emmanuel the third, his imprisonment, and of Hitler having ordered his subsequent rescue by Nazi special forces. The Führer was still loyal to IL Duce.”

What he most wanted not to talk about was the aftermath of fascism’s fall in Lwów. As was true throughout Europe, Italian soldiers there were gradually relieved of their duties by the Germans. Then following Italy’s surrender to the Allies on the eighth of September 1943, the announcement being made five days later, Italian soldiers in Lwów were preparing to go home. Discouraged and emptied after four long years of pointless warfare, they longed for the warmth of their families. It was anticipation never to be realized.

One week later on September 15th, with overtly calloused indifference to the sanctity of human life, and with typical Nazi barbarism, German soldiers covertly massacred the *entire* Italian Leopoli Division.

The event is said to have occurred in the forest of Lisentisky, west of Lwów. But there are questions. Soviet authorities, two years belatedly, released the news that they had discovered in Lwów – by then renamed *Lviv* in Ukrainian – the mass graves of some two thousand Italian soldiers. Included were generals, colonels and junior officers, allegedly murdered by the Nazis in 1943. The Italian Ministry of Defense, for whatever reason, denyingly replied that it was not so; that in those places, and in that period, massacres of that size had often taken place. Who then were these poor victims? When were they really killed, and by whom? Had these soldiers also been patrons of the Winiarnia Italia soldier’s club?

The tragically macabre discovery is said to have resulted from the work of a student research group in Lviv, dealing with historical facts of World War II. Their leader,

a Vladimir Demchak, had said that, "the names have already been identified; more than fifty officers killed." And he added that there were also witnesses to the massacre. A painter, a certain Semyon Gruzberg, remembered seeing the Nazis, "*accompany the column of gray-uniformed Italians.*" A certain Mrs. Yulia Moska Bukovskaya, age 60, confirmed the date of the massacre by saying that in September of 1943, she had seen Italians exterminated in groups, in the forest of Lisentisky. "They were machine-gunned down in a sand quarry," she reported. "The bodies were then burned in their sandy grave, and then the Germans planted trees over the grave pits, to hide the traces of their crime."

What was the official position taken by the new Italian government in the immediate aftermath of the war, in 1945 and 1946? And how did the new Italian Republic deal with the ever more pressing evidence of the facts? At first the news was rebuffed on the grounds that it was simply communist propaganda at a very sensitive period when new governments were being formed in European countries. And, that this *news...* this *propaganda*, was intended to fortify the communist factions which, as Partisans, had fought long and hard against Fascism and Nazism, and subsequently they found themselves struggling against new forms of capitalist Republicanism.

So it was suggested that the only plausible theory was that the massacre had taken place, after the 1943 Italian surrender, not against the Leopoli Division, but against various Italian troops left on their own, abandoned in various European countries, and eventually arrested and rounded up by the Nazis, and then sent to Poland. Unfortunately, after that 1943 surrender date, the historical archive of the Italian Ministry of Defense was no longer able to collect official data on their troops abroad. And the Germans had also, predictably and perhaps conveniently, '*lost all records*'.

Now there are many who remember the deportation of Italian soldiers rounded up by the Germans in the Balkans, and elsewhere, after the Italian surrender on September 8th, 1943. They remember sealed wagons traveling for weeks in Europe, traveling to a point which was then in Poland – to Lwów, at the edge of the Russian front. And there they were put into prison camps. Multiply those memories of Italian veterans; add the growing feeling among the Italian people, especially from Italian families with missing loved ones that something had really happened out there – out there where the Russians say a massacre took place – and it certainly appears to amount to something.

Conversely there are those who exclude the possibility of a massacre by the Germans. There are even those who interpret everything as an attempt by the Soviets to invent another Nazi war crime, intended to justify the deaths of too many Italian soldiers who died in the captivity of the Red Army, and of whom nothing had been heard; not even the place of their burial. That the Division disappeared however – that the story of thousands of Italians vanishing without a trace even exists – is dividing public opinion among Italian citizens, wartime witnesses, and their heirs.

Another problem that the Commission of Inquiry had, was the task of solving why – regarding the alleged *Leopoli massacre* – why there was no trace in the archives of the Red Cross. However, among the documents of the Red Cross in Geneva, there was a report that provided some interesting details concerning Italian wartime internees.

In their report, submitted in August of 1948 to the Seventeenth International Conference of the Humanitarian Organization in Stockholm, it was stated that the number of Italian military and civilians interned in German camps after the September 1943 surrender of Italy, was as high as 550,000! But in Geneva, that list was never

communicated. Why? Perhaps because during the final years of the war, Berlin had continuously denied open information on the status of prisoners of war. Berlin's position, at that time, was to deal with the problem only with the provisional government of the Republic of Salò, their own Nazi-Fascist outfit, *La Repubblica Sociale Italiana* – the RSI of Northern Italy. Thereby they excluded any international authority. The Red Cross claimed never to have been authorized for field visits, nor for the distribution of relief. The Great Reich, in fact, considered itself above any law. And those of the RSI, headquartered on lake Garda with a *fallen* Duce, were only timid servants bowing before the Great Third Reich.

Whatever be the truth, over 2,000 of Germany's former allies, true sons of Italy, were thus destroyed in a mass execution – a mass murder. And thereafter the bodies, as reported, were burned and buried, trees then being planted atop the mass graves. Whatever really happened, the Italian *Leopoli Division* would become known as *the division which disappeared in 1943*.