

“I learned too that a lot had happened, bad things. Dani’s parents, for example, had been murdered during a Nazi pogrom against Jews which was implemented in July, and that the last they knew about Dani herself, was that she had been in the Janowska labor camp since September.

“They told me also that a few weeks ago the Germans had begun transferring all the Jewish prisoners from Janowska to Lwów’s new ghetto, and that deportations there were taking place daily.”

And now, with the old man’s eyes glistening with tears of emotion, Valerie said, “Oh, Dad. How awful. How terrible. Could that mean that ... ”

“Oh yes; and it *did* mean – that Dani might well be on her way to a death camp; there were now six of them in Poland. But you know, Val, as sad as that made me, it also made me angry.”

He stood now and walked to the window. Peering out into the deepening darkness he said, “I couldn’t recall, and I don’t recall even now, any time in my entire life when I had ever felt that much anger. And out of that anger, that rage when I returned to Lwów, grew my resolve to find her, and to rescue her as soon as possible.”

A long silence now, wherein only the muted sound of the television was heard, while neither of them looked at the screen and while George entered the room with his coffee and sat next to his wife. Uncertain as to the cause for the strained silence, he said nothing. Finally Valerie spoke.

“But how, Dad? How would you go about ... I mean ... I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Exactly. And that was my problem; where to start?”

“Start what?” George said, seeking now to understand the conversation.

“We’ve been talking about Victor’s efforts to find the girls, and now especially to find Dani,” Gina explained.

“Aah, I see! So what was happening?”

Victor was returning to his seat as he explained. “For a while, nothing, And then I got to thinking of what I might learn from the Germans' mail. And why not? Since I had access to all of it, I started steaming open letters written by the ghetto guards, as well as letters written to them.” A playful wink now as he remarked, ”And Oooh! I’m learning some *steamy* things!” Then serious again: “But I was really looking for something big, anything; any kind of information that might help me get favors from them. And I did learn of such things, useful information that I could even use to bribe some of the guards. But I needed something really good! It had to be a charge that would really stick, that would *stick* like *mmm*-elated *mmm*-ozzarella on *mmm*-anicotti!”

“Then one week before Christmas, while I was still digging away with my hot iron and steam rag, I finally struck gold. Primo paydirt!”

“And that was ...?” said George.

“A confirmed love affair; a scandalous affair which would’ve been of the nastiest kind in the eyes of the SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler! This was between – are you ready for this?” He paused and then said, ”Between an SS lieutenant, one appointed over the Lwów ghetto guards, and ... and *his lover*, an SS infantry captain who'd recently been reassigned to the Russian front and was due to leave soon.”

George spilled his coffee and Valerie was speechless.

“You mean ... ” George was standing now, brushing coffee droplets from his lap.
“...That these two *officers* were ...”

“*Esattamente!*” Victor snapped. “Egg-zactly! Oi! You should’ve seen the lieutenant’s letter! Even Gina and I never used such mushy, schmaltzy words with each other; not even before our marriage.”

“Really! What kind of *mushy* words?” asked Valerie.

“Yeah, what did he write, Dad?” George was laughing now, a sarcastic laughter.

“Well, my German was rusty, but better than when I was in Vienna back in ‘thirty-nine. So I’ll never forget his opening lines. He started out by saying, three or four times, ‘*Ich vermiss dich,*’ which means ‘I miss you.’ And this captain hasn’t even left yet! Then, ‘*Ich brauche dich zu berühren,*’ which means ‘*I need to touch you,*’ and ‘*Ich brauche deine Berührung,*’ ... translates to ‘*I need your touch.*’ After that he wrote that he’d never loved any man more than he loved the Führer, and then he said, “but then I met you!”

“Oh *please!*” said George pleadingly, feeling somewhat nauseous about the matter as the others laughed derisively. When composure returned, he said, “What else Dad; what else did he write?” He and Valerie were fascinated by the obsessively passionate and sleazy character of the lieutenant’s love letter.

“Some of the expressions I remember are the words that were the thrust of the lieutenant’s sentiments for his lover captain. He used words like, ‘*Ich liebe dich,*’ meaning, ‘I love you.’ Oh, that was in almost every other line. Then there were things like, ‘*In gedanken dort. Hast du an mich gedacht?*’ which meant, ‘I always think of you, have you thought of me?’ And then, ‘*ewig dein, hast du mich lieb?*’ or, ‘I’m yours forever, do you love me?’”

When the satirical laughter subsided, Victor explained, “Now you can say what you want about Hitler; he *was* a monster ... but a *peculiar monster*! He couldn't tolerate the use of tobacco, and would forbid smoking in his presence or even under the same roof. He abstained from alcohol, didn't tolerate the slightest drunkenness, and he *despised* homosexuality! And I don't think he learned any of that from his Catholic religion. Homosexual acts were considered to be a crime against his Third Reich, and they called for imprisonment in a concentration camp. But for such as the SS lieutenant and his lover captain ... oh ho ho ho ho ! If their situation ever got upstairs to SS headquarters, then we're talking about *Lieutenant Lynched* and *Captain Corpse*. It could have meant execution by a firing squad. Because for them, as SS officers, it was more than a crime, it was treason! And they should have known that; in fact they did know that!”

“Imagine,” said George, “that simple words of love could get a person shot.”

“In this case, yes! But oh, it was so much more than that,” Victor replied. “The statements he made in his letter became as though imprinted on my mind. Wonderful words they were, everyone of which spelled out – for me any way – Dani's release. Because those statements went on to describe how the captain's departure would, in the lieutenant's words, ‘*leave a gaping hole in my heart,*’ that could only be ‘*filled by the warmth of your caress and the tenderness of your lips against mine.*’

“Oh, on he went, reminiscing about the ecstasy of their nights of passion, when they had realized that they were ‘*meant for each other.*’ And he wrote that he yearned for the day when he would be able to gaze into the captain's eyes again, and ‘*feel complete*’; things like that. How he would ‘*hold him tight and never let him go again.*’ Oh, I virtually memorized that letter for what it meant for Dani, it delighted me and made me

sick at the same time. Then he ended by writing, ‘*Gedenke mein, mich nicht vergessen,*’ meaning, ‘Think of me, do not forget me,’ and adding a long string of ‘*kuss, kuss, kuss,* and *ewig treu,*’ that is, ‘kiss kiss kiss, and eternal love.’ Now statements like those could have gotten both of them shot!

“Now then, based on this *steamy* finding, and others, I concocted a devious plan; one involving that homosexual lieutenant and three of his subordinate ghetto guards. All three had wives, you see, and children back home in Germany; and all three of them shared Polish mistresses from the same brothel, there in Lwów. How about that? Now I won't go into the details, no need to. And maybe it was a cruel thing to do; but they deserved it, the scoundrels. And their wives were also entitled to know. I'll just say that everyone was about to find out everything about everybody.

“Besides, it was a far less cruel thing than what was happening to Dani, and what had happened to her parents. And those were the things that caused the anger in me to boil up, enough to make me want to spill out to the Gestapo, everybody's dirty little secrets of homosexuality, fornication and adultery, regardless of the consequences; even if it meant death by a firing squad. And I was in a position to do this if they wouldn't do what I was ready to demand.”

Valerie said, “Dad, you were vicious.”

“You think so? Maybe I was. Anyway, I had it planned how to leverage their cooperation. So now I mailed them invitations, invitations to the holiday parties at the Winiarnia. And I also invited a few token peers from their units. I even gave them personalized and discounted entry coupons. Because remember, this was an *Italian* club; this was not for Germans.

“Now the invitations for those adulterous guards included an offer for them to get tickets for free drinks if ... if they were escorting a female companion. And let me tell you, they loved that idea!”

Valerie's eyes sparkled with mischief. “Did any of them decide to bring their Polish mistress?”

“Oh, how I had hoped that they would. And they did! They fell right into my trap! On the night of the twenty-fifth, they arrived with their brothel mistresses just as I'd planned. And they were required to show their military ID cards at the door in order to validate their discount entrance passes and their free drink coupons.

“So now I'm *really* learning things, connecting faces with names. And when the SS lieutenant showed up I greeted him with a bottle of Lacrima Cristi. It's a fruity wine that the Germans seemed to especially appreciate. So in comes the lieutenant, and I have a drink with him before personally escorting him across the courtyard to the Officer's Club. No guns were allowed inside, so he agrees to leave his sidearm in a locker with the coatroom attendant. Then I introduced him to my dear friends, a pair of Sicilian lieutenants who were secretly expecting him, and I left.

“And the party was a great success. I had made personal contact with my target, the three ghetto guards, while my two Sicilian friends had been making the lieutenant feel right at home.

“So, by around eleven o'clock the three lieutenants were involved in a heated card game, gambling for rare stamps, stamps which I'd provided for my friends earlier, stamps that were probably better than money in that place, at that time. And according to our covert plan, the SS lieutenant was *winning*. In fact, he'd *won* several hands, raking in

some very old Italian and German stamps. So he's feeling pretty good about himself; he's feeling lucky.

“Then in I walked ... again, and asked if I could sit in. They all agreed and I sat down. Now this German, gloating over his winnings and having become pretty cocky from the wine, blurts out, ‘I hope you brought some good stamps with you.’ So I said, ‘What have *you* got to play with?’ And as if he had just won the battle for Leningrad single-handed, and with triumphal delight, he shows me his winnings.

“So now I said, ‘I have with me one single stamp worth a hundred times what you've got there.’ And he says, ‘Show it.’ And I laid it on the table.

“Now at this point all eyes were on him as he examined my stamp. I could almost see the question marks in his mind. Then he looked up at me ... like he could kill. ‘You must be joking,’ he says. ‘You must think I'm a fool, that I don't know stamps! This is nothing! Nothing more than a recently used, and I might add *worthless*, nineteen forty-one German Racehorse stamp.’ I said, ‘You're right.’ And he said, ‘You couldn't even mail a letter with it!’ And I said, ‘Oooh, but you're wrong, because a letter *was* mailed with it! You see, it's not the catalog value that makes this stamp priceless; it's the letter the stamp came from that matters.’

“So now he swears at me, barks at me in German, ‘*Was in der Hölle redest du?*’ And in case you missed the meaning, and pardon my literal translation, he said, ‘What in the hell are you talking about?’

“By now my two Sicilian friends had moved their chairs to his side of the table; one to his right and one to his left, and he was beginning to feel uncomfortable. But he

had no idea how much worse it was going to get. And now my friend on his left said to him, 'We know *certain things*.' And my friend to his right added, 'About *certain people*.'

"Now this lieutenant, this ... *Dutchman*, didn't like at all what was going on, and he bellowed something nasty in German as he stood up. So now my two Sicilian friends reached up, grabbed him, and slammed him back into his chair. And now it was my turn.

"I reached into my coat pocket; I pulled out his letter; and I began reading out loud. '*I never loved any man more than the Führer ... but then I met you ... your departure left a gaping hole in my heart that can only be filled by your warm caresses and the tenderness of your lips against mine ... I long for the ecstasy of our nights of passion when we realized that we were meant for each other.*' And I won't sicken you with the remainder of it as I went on.

"So what do you think, George? Have any idea of what an SS officer's face looks like when he knows his goose is cooked?"

George only smiled.

"Well, nobody else did either; not until at the Nuremberg trials after the war. But my two Sicilian friends and I got our first glimpse of it at that Christmas party in nineteen forty-one.

"So now this lieutenant stood up again, and moved back from the table faster than my friends could grab him. And there he stood while he bawled brazenly, 'Ich mache mir keine Sorgen,' that is, 'I'm not worried.'

"Now that did it! My anger peaked and I stood up. I said to him, 'Fine! It doesn't worry you now. But I'll tell you this! If any harm comes to my girlfriend who's in your

custody in your lousy ghetto, then I promise that I will personally see that the man you love is shot before a firing squad, and his blood will be on your hands.’”

“And then ... ?” said George.

“He sat down like he'd been poleaxed! And as I sat down, he said, ‘What can I do? There's nothing I can do.’ I said, ‘Good! That’s all I want you to do. *Do nothing!* I will personally escort my girlfriend out of your stinkin’ ghetto, and you will *do nothing to stop us* from walking out.’ Then while explaining that I had devised a plan for Dani’s escape, I put his letter back into my coat pocket and took out the three letters belonging to his ghetto guards. I explained to him their situation; that they had also been invited; and that they were presently being entertained by their mistresses in one of the back rooms of the Winiarnia Italia soldier’s club across the courtyard. I said he was to leave my rare stamps on the table, that he was to go over there and threaten them regarding their adultery, and to mention their incriminating letters.

“I told him to enter the Winiarnia through the back door, to walk in on them and to catch them in the act. He was to send their brothel mistresses home, and then to have a stern *I-outrank-you talk* with the three about *German morality*. If there was any static he was to explain that he was in possession of their self-damning letters, and that if they repeated their immoral conduct he would forward those letters to their wives. Then he was to send the three back to their stations, and return to the officer’s club where I would explain to him how the escape would take place.”