

In Northern Italy, in the district of Victor's and Carlo's little town of Volargne di Dolce, where German troops had once been viewed as polite guests and where they had so conducted themselves; they now grew surly. Angered perhaps at realizing their cause to now, had been purposeless, they became brutal. They became as a pack of paranoid animals; looting and drunkenness was the order of the day.

Much aware of the Allied advances in the south and central parts of the country, the German morale, and that of the RSI of Northern Italy, had sunken to unimagined levels. Virtually to a man they were hopelessly disheartened. Miserable and fearful, despair could be seen in every countenance.

For it was patently clear by late 1944, that Germany was losing the war on all fronts. As for Hitler's hope of the possibility of a "final victory" – as for his dream of a 1000-Year Reich – they had devolved to nothing more than empty promises. Fear of the Allies and anger towards the Italians was now evident in all their faces. As the Allies continued their northward advance, the Nazis gradually retreated toward the road leading to the Alpine Brenner pass, historically the proverbial Gateway into Germany.

For well over 3,000 years it had been an avenue of passage used by those whom ancient Rome had considered to be barbarians. And now facing certain defeat, the hordes of retreating Nazi barbarians are forming a bottleneck there in the Western Valpolicella region, adjacent to Lake Garda.

On the lake's opposite bank and in the town of Saló, lie the headquarters of the RSI, the Nazi-Fascist government of Italy's ousted IL Duce, Benito Mussolini. It is then in the midst of all this, that Victor, Carlo and Luigi find themselves, along with their

families. They are isolated from the Italian peninsula; they are isolated from Lwów in Poland; and they are as if trapped in the snarl of a military bottleneck – in the retreat of a drunken and emotionally drained Nazi army.

But it is also an army driven by desperation. And as they yield ground, they leave their mark.

“Just look, Carlo, at what they’re doing to our country!”

Carlo nodded. He and his friend, Count Valentini, are standing on the porch of Valentini’s spacious villa in Volargne.

“They’re called *engineers*,” Valentini fumed sarcastically, “the *Einsatzgruppe Italien*. And their German officers have set up their headquarters on *my property*! Why, the poor devils are nothing but slaves, and they’re our people – the people of Volargne!”

Carlo nodded his agreement. “Yes, I know, Signore Valentini, and I share your anger. Indeed, I’ve personally spoken with some of them. But they say the Germans are doing this everywhere: in France against the recent Allied invasion, and even in Germany against the advancing Russians. The war has brought their manpower down to its very dregs. Some time ago, Fritz Todt, the Reich’s chief engineer, died in a plane crash, and his organization needed a new boss. So along comes this ... this *Dutchman* architect, a personal friend of Hitler whose name is ... Aaah ... Speer; that’s his name, Albert Speer. So he’s the new man in charge, and he’s authorized the *einsatzgruppe* to organize any number of civilians into forced labor, in order to construct barriers at every entrance to Germany. So now our friends – *i nostri Volargnesi* – are being forced to destroy their own countryside, building defensive positions and military obstacles.”

The Count cocked his head quizzically and looked at Carlo in a wise way. “The Germans don’t really believe that this is going to stop the Allies, do they?”

Carlo thought for a moment and then said, “Madmen think differently than we do, Signore Valentini. But then again, maybe it’s what they’re drinking.”

“Oh? And that would be ... ?”

“Victor and I have been ordered to supply wine to the German quartermaster. So, we don’t like it but we’re supplying the wine. It’s not that they get the good wine, you understand; it’s been cheap leftovers of the season. The stuff made from vineyard gleanings by local school children and occasional gypsies after the final grape harvest, and it’s often delivered in bottles that are chipped and scarred. When they complain, I say to them: What can I do? It’s the bad roads, the craters. Up until now, they’re contented.”

The Count smiled and threw an arm over Carlo’s shoulder. With a wink he said, “Well, my friend; you keep up the good work – or the bad work. Meanwhile I salute you; all Italy would salute you.”

“Papá, we have a problem.” Victor’s face wears a worried frown.

Carlo looked up from his work in the bottle shop. “Oh? And what is that?”

“Yesterday, Signore Dieter, the quartermaster, threatened me.”

“Really! He threatened you? Why?”

“He boldly complained to me about our wine’s poor quality. He told me that unless we began delivering good wine in good bottles, that there would be – as he put it – reprimands. Now I don’t know exactly what he means by that, but you know the Germans.”

Carlo nodded. “Umm, yes I do; I know the Germans. Well, we’ve obviously got to do what he says, but is there any way we can use this to our advantage?”

In Orlando, Victor had been relating the experience over dinner. And now Gina had tactfully interrupted. “Pass the lasagna, please.”

As the aroma-laden dish traveled up the Perantoni’s table, Victor’s riveting tale paused briefly. Then came Robert’s question.

“So how did you and grandpa deal with the German’s order?”

Victor allowed himself a conspiratorial grin. Using that familiar Italian gesture he said, “Of course, we’d been delivering the wine for some time, but since they were now getting testy, we decided on something different. I’ll tell you what we did.” And he paused meaningfully.

Mary’s mock impatience prompted a chuckle from everyone when she said, “So get on with it, Dad! *What did you do?*”

Victor took a leisurely sip of his wine. “It was a curious thing,” he said. “We got to thinking about the fact that German soldiers were less brutal when they were drunk from our Italian wine than when they were drunk on their Nazi ideology. So we decided to give them wine that was *WINE!*” An almost demonic smile as he added, “We decided to give them freshly fermented wine, wine laced with uncooked *mosto* from recently stomped grapes, and deceitfully covered over with extra-strong *g-r-r-r-r-rappa!*”

George said, “Explain that to everybody, Dad. Tell them what grappa is.”

Victor grinned like a mischievous elf. “Literally, grappa means *grape stalk*. It was a brandy we used to make by distilling the residue – the grape skins along with the stems

and seeds – that was left over after the pressing. Originally we made it to cut down on waste, using the leftovers at the end of the season.

“But now this was potent stuff. Like I said; it’s distilled – it’s about a hundred and twenty proof; that’s sixty percent pure alcohol. So now your grandfather and I begin delivering some *very fine* wine, as requested, and it’s all hopped up with our grappa. Well! These German soldiers have been used to the usual wine, alcohol about twelve percent. And they probably had never tasted anything as good as our *mixed grappa wine*; at least not since they left home. To them, this was like their schnapps back in Germany – a grape schnapps.”

“Mmmm...Sounds good,” remarked Mary. “I think I’d like that.”

“It does sound good; I agree,” said Victor, “But let me give you a little chemistry lesson. Uncooked *mosto* is the first strain from pressed or stomped grapes. Very rich in bacteria it is, especially if they were stomped by children with dirty feet! That’s why a person should always cook the mosto if they’re not going to ferment it into wine. And, of course, it blended perfectly with the wine and the grappa.”

“Tell everybody what this mixture does, Dad.” George was snickering now; he knew what was coming and he could hardly wait.

“Ah, yes. Well, used moderately – and what did the Nazis know about moderate – this uncooked under-fermented wine-grappa mixture is what we might call a *digestive drink*. What I mean is, Ex-Lax should be so good.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” said Mary. And everyone at the table began sniggering.

“Talk about healthy bowels!” Victor went on. “Realizing that the average German soldier had virtually no concept of *enough*, not when it came to wine, the Wehrmacht’s

super troopers were suddenly *souper poopers*. And that's spelled s-o-u-p-e-r. Oh, and you'll love this!" He was himself laughing now. "Guess what they thought was the problem. They blamed the problem on some change in the local *water*! Aah ha ha ha! And that, of course, just increased their use of the wine! Aah ha ha ha haaaa! "

And now the entire table was in hysterics. Victor, still grinning with childlike satisfaction, went on to explain that the Italian partisans then stepped up their harassment, taking advantage of the drunken disorder; the logistical mayhem and ongoing confusion that he and Carlo had caused.