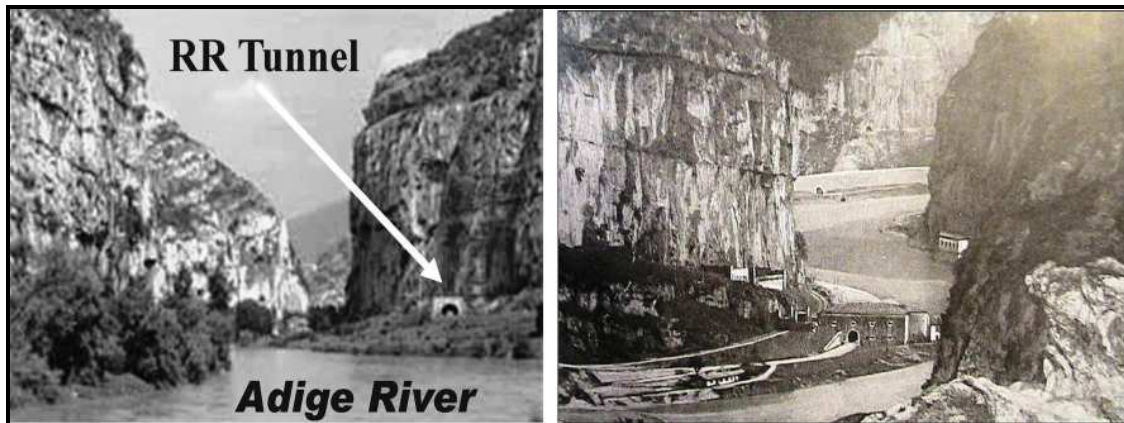


He remembered that the train, from the time of its arrival, had been shrouded in mystery. Because this was not a train for prisoner deportation as was so often the case. What was not known, save by only a few, was that the 15 rail cars were the property of the German Army's Ordnance Division.

For several days the train had sat there, little more than 100 yards from the town of Volargne, Victor's town. Guarded closely day and night by German soldiers, it was parked on a siding only a few miles south of the bend in the river – a bend that was called *La Chiusa*. Literally the name meant "The Lock," or "River-Closing." And doubtless it was the very secrecy surrounding the train that imbued it with such an ominously sinister and somber quality. To the townspeople of Volargne it represented something darkly menacing, something evil. Indeed, had they but known its contents, they would not have slept easily.

For these railway cars comprised part of a munitions train. Packed to their capacity with multiple tons of TNT, they were to be detonated inside the railway tunnel located on the southeast side of the river in the La Chiusa foothills. It goes without saying that the secret was tightly guarded



However, as though in compliance with Aeschylus' axiom, that truth is war's first casualty, there was a young man from Switzerland employed as an interpreter with the Todt organization of engineers. And this young fellow was altogether aware of the train's contents. More than that. Being of Swiss nationality and therefore a neutral – in his self-perceived allegiance at any rate – he was agreeable to selling that information. And this he did. To the Allied forces.

Victor remembered now that it was a bright Tuesday afternoon, November 21, 1944. He had been in the process of making routine deliveries of the Perantoni's *Liquor de Latrine* – the spiked grappa-wine – to the mess tents and canteens of the German quartermaster. He had parked his delivery van near that bend in the river, and had continued his delivery rounds by pedal cart – civilian motor vehicles not being allowed inside German compounds. After delivering the wine in Volargne, he had restocked his cart from the van and had begun pedaling towards the mess tents near Dolcé.



Faintly at first; and then as with a crescendo in music, growing in volume as he made his way past the marble foothills of Ceraino, he heard the sound of warplanes. And then suddenly, as if rising from the very earth behind the massive foothills, and flying very low, they came roaring directly over his head. Then just as suddenly they disappeared over the next foothill.

He could not see what happened next. For with their target then in sight, the aircraft had opened fire.

The town would literally stagger under the blow.

In Orlando, Victor now sat staring into space, the television scenes of Hiroshima forgotten. In their stead he saw himself, looking off in the direction of the planes' flight. Then abruptly, in his mind's eye, the sky over Volargne turned red, and then it was white and then black; it all occurring as though in an instant.

Back then, as he had stood watching on that infamous day, there had come the sound. It was a sound he would never forget, *could* never forget; a deep, thudding sound, followed by the reverberations of an inconceivably thunderous explosion. It was as if the very air had been blasted apart. He had felt a piercing pain in his ears; had felt the ground shudder uncontrollably. And it was as though the world had suddenly ended. Before his very eyes he saw every bottle of wine in the pedal cart shatter. Less than one second later, the events being virtually simultaneous, he had been thrown to the ground. And there he had felt his entire body, as though by some unearthly demonic force, being compressed. Immediately thereafter the pressure dissipated, and it became as if there was no air at all; no air to breathe, while his hair and his clothing were pulled in the direction of the explosion.

He had watched with wonder then as the wine, pouring from the cart and as though in slow motion, became airborne, flying horizontal to the ground, southward towards Volargne. Even as he had watched then, the air came rushing back. Suddenly he could breathe again. And as his breath returned, so did his hearing, allowing him an awareness of the re-echoing reverberations, of the cosmically devastating convulsion of

the very elements themselves. Caroming from foothill to foothill, the shuddering pulsations had been as a circle, threatening to return and finish him off – to destroy him!

Doubtless, the Allied aircraft had executed their mission with near perfection, the only flaw being to their own injury. The strike on the munitions train had resulted in a cataclysm of truly volcanic dimensions. Of such awesomely immeasurable power had been the detonation, that a generated vacuum had literally sucked one of the planes into its lethal vortex, hurling it to the ground. A second aircraft, though surviving, had carried away in its fuselage a wheel from the demolished train. And yet another had found itself riddled with fragments of the train, as though with shrapnel. Not even imagining what enormous havoc they would wreak, they had flown too low.

As for those buildings adjacent to the railway and facing the tracks, the initial impact of the blast had resulted in their being literally pulverized. The remaining buildings in the town had been seen to either crumble or to be knocked down by the explosion's colossal force, or to implode, due to the rapid and radical change of the barometric pressure. Others, when suddenly surrounded by a vacuum had exploded from the inside. Likewise, and for the same reasons, the dead and wounded of the populace had been afflicted by similar internal injuries; the eruptions of arterial and venous blood vessels.

Throughout the entirety of the river valley, throughout the entire Valpolicella and Lake Garda region, it had been as an apocalyptic trumpet blast, a gazette as it were, that the very Devil himself had taken Volargne as his own. By reasonable estimate, 96 percent of Volargne's buildings had been destroyed absolutely. In retrospect, the damage was at least equal to that sustained by the town of Cassino. There, however, over four months of

battle, bombings and shellings had produced the wreckage. But here, in Volargne, it had occurred in an instant of time. The town was no more.

“A sunny afternoon became night in one instant, and an apocalyptic end-of-the-world came into view after the dust settled and daylight came again, and survivors covered in dust and blood emerged from the rubble, like ghosts.”

***Quote by survivor Luigi Ferrari, Cavaliere di Vittorio Veneto.
From 1985 interview on 41st anniversary of Volargne's destruction.***



Some few moments had been required before Victor was able to regain even a semblance of composure. With his mind awhirl, filled with near panic and dread, he had remounted his pedal cart. Ignoring the wine that still streamed out of the carrier, squinting against a “snowfall” of white dust that made it difficult for him to keep his eyes open, he had traveled hurriedly back towards what had once been Volargne.

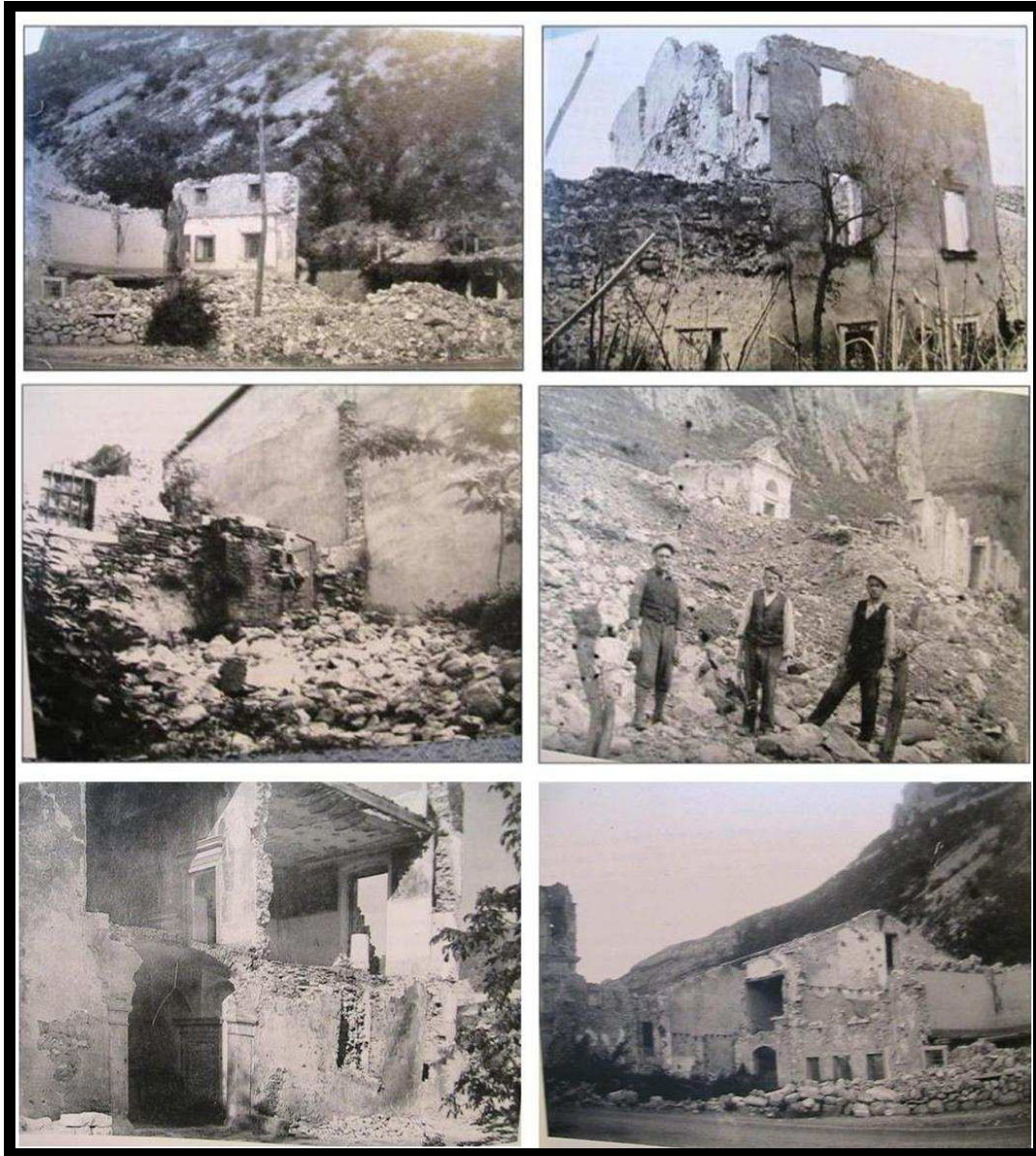
Down along the river bend he went, there to stop and gaze down the hill. But he had seen no town. He had seen only a cloud of dust where once the town had been. At first he had imagined himself to be still disorientated, or perhaps he had traveled in the

wrong direction. But discerning that the river was to his right, and that it was flowing southward, that wishful thinking had been short lived.

The rain outside his window in Orlando had stopped now; and as water continued to drip from the eaves, he remembered how he had watched the dust cloud slowly beginning to settle, how he had begun to see the jagged, surrealistic heaps and piles of unrecognizable rubble; the gaunt, disjointed skeletal remnants of walls still standing. And across what had been the city, fires burned out of control, dense columns of acrid smoke ascending.

Down the hill then to the town he had gone – down to where the road had ended, to where the rubble had begun. Then leaving his cart he had started walking. As he did, he had recalled his visit to Lwów after returning from Switzerland; had remembered the chaos that had confronted him there. But there was no comparison to be made. For here the devastation was greater by magnitudes; here the destruction was absolute.

It had seemed impossible. Less than an hour before, on that sunny, bucolic afternoon, he had been loading and unloading wine in that charmingly beautiful town. Then as by the war's witchery, he had found himself standing in the midst of a scene of apocalyptic proportions. And then the survivors, many of them wounded and bleeding – like apparitions in their coverings of dust, they had begun to emerge from among the shambles.



And he remembered now that he had been as a madman.

For the conscience-shattering scene that had lain before him was sufficient to prompt the very essence of unmitigated despair. It had been as though grief and anguish themselves had been distilled – as was his grappa – and then poured with malevolent intent over the little town; that the place should become irrecoverably intoxicated with misery. Feeling thus, he had been able to do no more than stand amidst the ruins and hurl his limitless hatred at the sky.

With loud screams and cries he had released the consuming anger that had been fermenting within him since the day when the Nazis had invaded his homeland of Poland. With vitriolic rage unadulterated, and with confused political loyalties, he had given voice to obscene curses against his former hero, IL Duce Benito Mussolini, cursing him for having betrayed Italy. At the same time and at the top of his voice – with near-endless tears making flesh-colored tracks through the town's dust that covered his face in mime-like fashion – he had cursed Adolf Hitler for having taken away IL Duce from the Italian people.

As he had stood there ranting away, appearing as a man bereft of all sanity, a platoon of German soldiers had arrived. They had stopped to observe his mad soliloquy, and had remained silent. For they too had been horrified, staggered by the enormity of what had happened to Volargne. While they had stood watching him, he had turned and began throwing pieces of dusty rubble at them, screaming aloud obscene curses against Germany and against the German people; against National Socialism; against Adolf Hitler and his idiot puppet, Benito Mussolini.

But the soldiers had chosen to ignore him; and walking away in bewilderment they had left him sobbing out his vulgar accusations of treason against Mussolini and Fascism. Abandoned to his pitiable psychopathy, he had fallen to his knees in an agony of inconsolable grief. And there, watched by curious survivors, he had ripped from the lapel of his coat the PNF party badge that IL Duce had given him at the Winiarnia fifteen years earlier. Then using a piece of brick from his shattered town, he had beaten and flattened the badge beyond recognition; and with a ferociously angry shout, vilifying IL Duce's name he threw it far into the Adige river.

The Adige river and the passage of La Chiusa through Volargne, Dolcé and Ceraino, provided transportation routes since even before the ancient Roman empire. Even Attila the Hun made his way through here. Marble, limestone, granite, and other rock materials were excavated and transported from here, and then used to build ancient Roman roads, theatres, and other structures, including the Arena of Verona. This location is bursting with history! The pictures below show ancient wallpaintings ruined by the explosion, and some which the explosion had exposed when obsolete plaster was sucked off the walls due to the sudden vacuum.



Although past his believing at that moment, the truth was that consolation would come, that others would come, that Carlo and Luigi and Gina would come from Mantua to join him. And here they would stay, throughout the night and the following day. There would be recovery of a sort. Italian soldiers and others would begin searching for victims in the rubble; perhaps even some Germans would help. An Italian Army hospital tent would be hastily set up near the riverbank, beyond the parameters of the obliterated town. And there the wounded would be helped to heal.