

“Your grandfather loved inviting Italian celebrities to the Winiarnia, especially sports personalities. That’s how I got started in photography. He’d lend me his camera and I’d photograph him with the stars. There’d be drivers like Nuvolari and Varzi, Olympic athletes and ...”

“Did you say Nuvolari? .. *Tazio Nuvolari*?” Robert interrupted. “And Achille Varzi? I mean... talk about auto racing! Those two champs put auto racing in the dictionary! Wow! Nuvolari and Varzi are the icons of the sport! When I think of Ferrari, Alfa Romeo and Maserati, or even tire companies like Pirelli, they owe their *names* to these two famous rival aces. And Grandpa knew them?”

“Oh, yes”, replied Victor equally as excited, “celebrities of all sorts have been hosted at the Winiarnia Italia Inn. Bicycle racers, singers and others. Why, the entire A/C Milan Soccer Team ate and drank there on one occasion. And your grandfather always wanted to be photographed with his famous guests. And he always wanted me to shoot the pictures!



“And Nuvolari, by the way, was not only a friend, but also a neighbor when we lived in Mantua.” Victor grinned as he remembered a particular occasion. “I’ll never forget the night we took a Lancia Astura Cabriolet over to Nuvolari’s place.” And he chuckled. “We needed to hide it from the Germans.”

“Oh?” Robert exclaimed quietly. “What was that all about?”

“Aah, that’s a story for another time, Beto. It’d take too long to tell it now.”



Changing the subject, George said, “Speaking of telling stories, that was quite a tale you shared with Val a few days back; about how you bluffed your way back to Lwów. She told us all about it.”

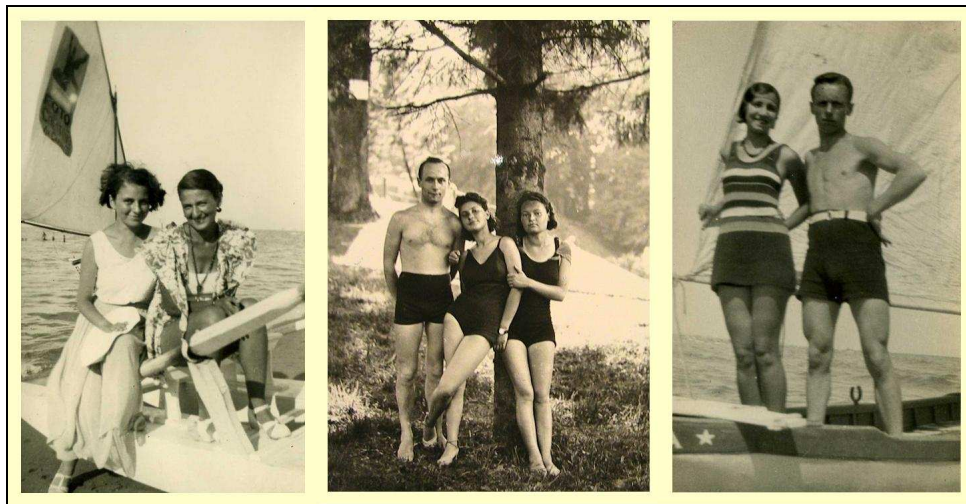
“Aah ha ha ha, he laughed. “Oh, she did, eh? Well, I hope she didn’t exaggerate too much.”

“C’mon, Dad! That story doesn’t need exaggerating. But what did happen after you found that everything was gone, home, friends, and all?”

“Ah, that. Well, around the middle of August the Italians came, an Italian division. Since the Germans now needed all their troops on their eastern front, very few were left in Lwów; they’d left the Italians to care for that.”

“And what was that like?” They are approaching Fairview Shores now.

“Well,” and he paused thoughtfully. “It was better than the Russians and the Germans. Actually most anything would have been better than either of those; I think the Devil himself would have been better.” As they laughed together he said, “But I have to say that the Italians demonstrated a lot more compassion for the people. And we now spoke the same language, which was good. So again I started searching for Stasi and Dani. I had a couple of photos, including the one of me and the girls in our swimsuits, and I’d show people the pictures and ask if they had seen them. But the answer was always no.



“So I decided to hitch-hike out to the farm, Ivan Doroshenko’s farm, hoping to find his daughter Lari there. But on the way I was picked up by an Italian Army patrol.”

“And how did that go?” Robert’s question as they turned right onto Fairview Shores.

“It could’ve been worse,” Victor replied philosophically. “I told them I was an Italian, and that I was a wine importer living in Lwów. But they arrested me anyway. Then it was off to Lwów’s Italian Military Police headquarters, where I was interviewed

by a field commander. I explained to him there that I had a dual citizenship with Poland, and that I had the legal right to be in Lwów.”

“And ... ?” said George.

Chuckling as he replied he said, “And I began to feel a little like the apostle Paul. Remember, George, when he had to explain to an Roman centurion that he, although Jewish, had Roman citizenship? Well, like Paul’s Roman officer, this commander too was puzzled. So he called for advice from Division Headquarters. And when he did that, the division commander somehow got involved. And for whatever reason he took an interest in me, asking that I be sent to him, to Division Headquarters, for more interviews.

“So now I’m at the Division Headquarters; I’ve been searched; and I’m still trying to explain that my dual citizenship allows me to remain in Lwów. Then the issue of my draft status came up, and by now I was getting pretty frustrated. I even tried to make a deal with them. I said I’d put on the Italian uniform if I were allowed to serve in Lwów.”

“And how did that work?” George asked.

“It didn’t. The division commander stepped in and said I couldn’t join the Army without a proper induction, and without being trained in Italy. He also said that he was obligated to send me there for military training regardless of my dual citizenship.”

Again Robert leaned forward over the seats. “And why was that?”

“In the words of the commander, ‘Because there isn’t any Poland.’ That’s what he said: ‘There isn’t any Poland.’ And I’ll tell you, Roberto; those words, coming as they did, were like a knife in my heart! Suddenly I realized that what he had just said was true: Poland *didn’t* exist! Not any more. I was just a draft-dodging Italian citizen in a Nazi occupied territory under control of the General Government of the one thousand year

Reich. And that's all there was to it. There was no Perantoni wine business, there was no Winiarnia; it didn't exist any more; my girlfriends were nowhere to be found; and André and Franki were gone. Not only was everything changed, everything was *gone!*" A whispered echo: "Everything was gone."

Victor grew silent for a moment, that of the car and the neighborhood now being the only sounds. And then he said, "And right then ... right then and there I just wanted to break down and cry. Well, I guess the way I felt was pretty evident to the commander. Because now he invited me into his office where he offered me a deal."

"Oh really!" said George, taking his eyes from the road briefly.

"Oh yes. You see, like me the commander too was an avid stamp collector, and he had come by one of those nineteen twenty-nine Winiarnia invitation postcards, the ones with the fake Mussolini stamp, you'll remember. He told me that he'd obtained it at a trade fair in Naples; said it had been a hot item and that he didn't get it cheap! So he explained that since he was now stationed in Lwów, that he'd become determined to look up the Winiarnia, hoping to find me or André; better yet both of us. And when I heard that, I suddenly understood why he'd taken an interest in me – why he knew my name and why he had allegedly *overheard* of my arrest.

"Then he reached into his briefcase and took out one of those famous postcards. When I explained to him that the stamp featured in the middle of the card was only fake art, he laughed and said that he already knew that; but that it was beautiful; that it was desirable; and that it promoted IL Duce's face on a stamp – one that didn't exist at the time, but was admired by all who saw it. Then he said to me, 'Are you ready to trade?' And now I was surprised. He said that if I could give him a full sheet of André's phony

Mussolini stamps, that he would assign me to the new Italian military post office for six months before sending me off for training. Well, I didn't have any of my stamps with me; of course. I had them secured away at the place where I was staying, along with André's and Franki's collections."

They were nearly back home now and about to turn onto the Shasta Drive cul-de-sac. Victor concluded his story. "Then the commander said, 'And who knows, the war might be over in six months.' Well, the way that the war had been escalating, I was sure that wasn't going to happen. Even so, I felt like a dead man resurrected! So I told the commander that I'd do even better than what he proposed. I showed him the corner block of those special fake stamps personally initialed by IL Duce, the one which I kept in my wallet in a glassine envelope and which got me past so many borders and checkpoints. When I offered it to the commander he snatched it up and sealed the deal with a great big smile and a warm, friendly handshake.

"So as we both ended up happy, I asked the commander where the Italian military post office was located. And he said they didn't have one yet, but that the field postal van was parked outside and that the first mail delivery was scheduled to arrive the next day. So then he asked me, 'Do you have any suggestion as to where we should locate the post office?' And I told him yes, you bet I do! At the Winiarnia Italia!"