

“As I said, it was in Vienna, and I was at the train station, waiting for my Zurich connection. And here was this group of young Italian fascists. They were all in their mid-twenties or so, about my age, and all of them were proudly wearing their PNF party badges on their jacket lapels. O they were really something, they thought. From what was said I gathered that they were returning to Italy from somewhere abroad – I don’t remember where – and even then I wondered why they were coming home. Because more than likely they’d promptly be drafted into Italy’s Army. But maybe that’s what they wanted; I don’t know.

“Anyway, there was the usual crowd in the station, and of this group there were about seven, as I remember, myself not included. So there we were, just loitering around this typical little stand-up coffee bar while they smoked cigarettes and told jokes, and sipped on espresso coffees. The three boldest of the bunch were drinking tall mugs of some kind of strong Austrian brew.

“And as I think back on it now, they were somewhat rowdy, I guess, as they relived their adventures. But the biggest problem was that in one way or another their conversation, especially their jokes, related to IL Duce and what all of us saw as the exciting times of fascism.

“So here now came these Austrian youths, about the same ages; and they’re wearing their Nazi Brownshirt uniforms and patrolling the train station, swaggering about in groups of two as if they were the SS themselves. Well, they took note of these noisy Italians; and in a friendly gesture they saluted toward the group with a sharp ‘Heil Hitler.’ Well, of course I said nothing, But these Italians, somewhat lazily actually, returned the salute with their traditional, ‘Duce a noi!’ meaning: ‘Duce to us!’

“Now I have no doubt that their obvious impertinence was seen by those Nazis as the prideful superiority of Italy and Fascism over Hitler and Nazism. And their more-than-apparent insolence was further revealed moments later when their derisive salutes were followed by their loud chuckling and even some raucous laughter.

“Well that did it! Because annoyed by this obvious rudeness, these two Austrian youths left and then returned in the company of two other Brownshirt teams. So now there were six of them. And without any pretense at salutations this time, they arrogantly asked these Italians if any of them were carrying concealed weapons.

“When the boldest of the Italians, and the biggest I might add – probably feeling that the answer was none of the Nazi's business – replied with a surely ‘No,’ the tallest of the Brownshirts, and completely lacking any courtesy, began to frisk him – patting him down and demanding that he loosen his knickerbockers and raise them above his knees.

“And suddenly it's like I'm back at the Czech border again, which had been only eight hours earlier, and my anxiety started climbing. You see I really loved wearing those knickerbockers. Wide and loose they were, and the wider the better. Because, as you know by now, that was where I kept most of my contraband hidden.”

He went on then to explain how his stamp collection, as well as his small fortune in Polish bank notes, had been carefully packed in linen bags. These had then been strapped to his legs, inside his voluminously baggy pants. As long as he was not physically searched and as long as he kept his composure, all was well.

But now he became frightfully aware that his new companions, however brief their relationship, were going to spell trouble for him. And he saw himself faced with the

pressing need to find some way to escape, or at least to distance himself from the group. Whatever the solution, it needed to be fast, and done without attracting attention.

“So there I was, wishing I were somewhere else – most anywhere else – when the opportunity I so very desperately needed came along. And it was none of my doing!

“You see, the Italian being frisked suddenly yelled at the Nazi Brownshirt, the one who was now bent over and patting down his knickers, and he said, ‘I have weapons up here.’ When the Nazi looked up, the Italian shook his two fists and said, ‘Do these qualify?’ And then, instead of raising his knickers as he’d been ordered, he kicked the Austrian over and a fistfight broke out.

“Well, the other Nazis joined in – of course that was to be expected, and the other Italians as well; and immediately the commotion had the attention of virtually everyone within earshot. And when that happened, I just slowly stepped backwards into the crowd of curiosity seekers and very quietly slipped away. Then I kept myself hidden in a toilet stall of a public restroom until it was time to board my train for Zurich.”