

And so may similar circumstances suddenly appeared to 28 year-old Franki Mrowicki on September first, 1939. His summer classes at the University of Lwów have been completed, and he has reported for duty at the Gdansk post office on the morning of September 1st. It is nearing 10:00 o'clock, and he is bewildered to find jackbooted Nazi soldiers filling the Hevelius Platz, the city's square. Cannon are also present. He watches for several minutes before he finally approaches a bystander.

“Good morning. I hope you’ll excuse me. My name is Mrowicki.” Then pointing across the street he explained. “I was scheduled to start work there at the post office this morning, and now I find this. What’s happened?”

Well,” said the stranger, turning and granting Mrowicki a dour expression, “it doesn’t look as though you’ll work today. Actually, I fear that it looks more like war! I understand that some ... *Dutchman*; some German general by the name of Brauchitsch, from what I hear, brought his troops down from the Westerplatte this morning. Our people tried to make a stand there, I’m told, but they were overwhelmed.”

Staggered by the news, Franki said, “Uh huh. I see. But what’s going on here?”

“Oh, it’s the postal workers. They’ve been here since around four this morning, I hear. It’s said that they’re nearly sixty in number and that they’ve armed themselves quite heavily. They say they’re holding the building as a show of resistance to what they expect to be an invasion.”

“They're what? *Sixty*?” Franki exclaimed. “*They’re sixty*?” He could not believe what he had just heard. “They must be joking; they must be out of their minds! I mean, just look at them, man!” Gesturing toward the mass of battle-helmeted troops he said, “There are ... what? Eighty; a hundred? And who knows how many other hundreds there are?”

“O I agree, Sir. But I understand that the building’s curator is inside, along with his ten year-old daughter and his wife, and they refuse to leave, too.”

Mrowicki shook his head. “Well, I must conclude then that they’re all mad as hatters. How long have you been here?”

The man glanced at his watch. “About half an hour; just watching.”

Franki said, “Uh huh! Well, it’s obvious that I can’t work. So I think I’ll do the same.” And he turned away to walk to a nearby restaurant where he ordered coffee.

Left with nothing to actually do, time passed slowly and he ordered yet a second cup. Outside in the street, amid a great deal of noise and confusion, he could hear German officers barking orders. Tensions were growing.

Then suddenly, at 11:00 o'clock, an explosion of small arms and cannon fire announced the German’s resurgent efforts to capture the building. Amid the resulting clamor, others came rushing and crowding into the restaurant, seeking security, seeking shelter from the sheer pandemonium that now filled the street. Then watching from the window, he and the others saw bits of masonry fly and glass shatter as bullets and artillery shells riddled the building’s facade. As the air continued to reverberate with gunfire and screams, shouting and death, he waited anxiously, hoping for any sort of a lull in the appalling mayhem. When it finally did occur, and brief though it was, he found

the opportunity to bolt from the restaurant and escape, running for all he was worth away from the chaos.

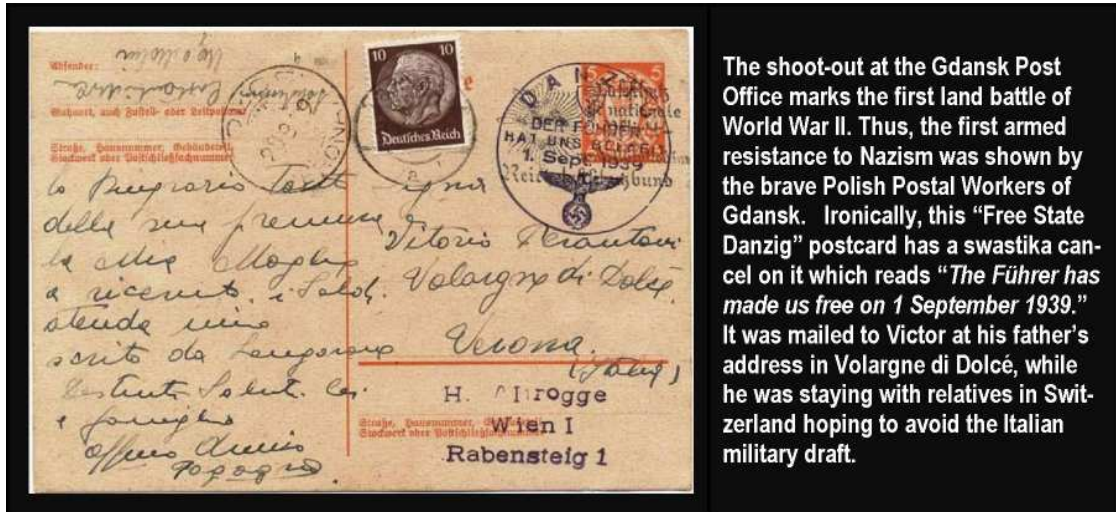
Perhaps it was a good thing that he never heard the ear-splitting roar, when a 1,320 pound explosive device was detonated at 5:00 o'clock that afternoon; that he never saw the walls of the post office building collapse, disintegrating in a noisy welter of smoke and dust; that he didn't know of the basement later being flooded with gasoline, and of five of his fellow Poles being burned to death.

But he would never forget the scene that was now indelibly emblazoned in his memory. The firefight with the Germans had shown him brutality and carnage such as he could have never envisioned. For now he had personally seen Europe's *first armed resistance* to Nazi aggression. He had seen a portion of the opening salvos of the Second World War. And when, finally, he had made his way back to Lwów two days later, there to take up residence at the Winiarnia's apartments along with André and Lari, Dani and Stasi, he learned that the 38 postal worker survivors of the assault had all been executed.

And now it was Tuesday morning. It was September 12th. Eleven days had passed since the mind-numbing slaughter at Gdansk; almost two weeks since many hundreds of German nationals and sympathizers had lined the curbs to watch the grand parade; since the officer-laden staff cars and the swaggering, goose-stepping soldiers had passed beneath the welcoming banner that had been raised to span the street.

Among other obvious changes was the fact that the city was now called Danzig. Its former German name having been restored, German flags were now everywhere. The banner therefore had read; "*Danzig begrüßt seinen Führer!*" – "Danzig welcomes the

Führer!” And indeed the city’s German population, woefully naive and grossly unaware of what was to follow, was largely of that mind.



Some four hundred and fifty miles to the southeast, at the Winiarnia’s apartment in Lwów that same morning, André, Franki and the girls were still sick at heart over the conscienceless massacre of the Gdansk postal workers, as well as similarly depressing news from other parts of the country. Sharing a breakfast of sausage and cheese, of bread and coffee, they chattered excitedly together; speculating as to what these affairs might mean regarding their own futures. Then abruptly the conversation stopped. Because while they were yet speaking they had begun to hear them coming. Almost subliminal at first, it was an ominous droning sound, a pre-mortum dirge that drew ever closer. The Stukas!

“Bombers!” André said quietly, and the five of them scrambled for whatever cover was at hand.

As the German aircraft then came overhead, as individual planes began to angle downward to deliver their message of destruction and annihilation, one could hear the sound of their acceleration, the piercing whine of their engines. And then the bombs – their whistling screams heralding their own imminent destruction; and the explosions that followed, one after another across the city. Lwów had fallen prey to Marshall Göring’s Luftwaffe.

Then as from out the midst of the ongoing devastation, from amid the swirling dust of pulverized buildings that was suddenly filling the air, Padre Michele came bolting into the Winiarnia.

Wire-frame glasses askew, his black frock dust-smudged; gasping and laboring to get his breath he shouted, “O Lord, they're gone, they’re gone!”

“Gone? Who's gone?” It was André’s response as he rose from under a table where he had taken shelter, Franki and the girls crawling from under a bed in the adjoining room.

“The other priests!” Padre exclaimed. “My companions! One of the bombs just hit the church and four of them were killed. The church too is gone! It’s nothing but ... ”

His next words were obliterated by a nearby explosion that set their ears to ringing. When next they could hear he said, “There’s nothing left but rubble. And the orphanage. It too is damaged; it’s no longer a safe place. But there are two hundred ... ”

Another blast, even closer now, and they felt the whole building tremble. Amid the dull roar that followed, Padre said, “Lord, that was close! I’d started to say that there are orphans back there, André; over two hundred of them!” He gestured back over his shoulder. “Two hundred and three children that need to be cared for now – immediately.

And there's also another problem. Father Lantini – he's an associate priest from Rome; he arrived just recently from Warsaw – tells me that the orphans, especially those who are Jewish, are in extreme danger from all this Nazi madness. Now I don't know exactly what all of that means, but it can't be good."

"Yes; yes; I agree," André murmured. And rubbing a thought-wrinkled brow he added, "Let me just think for a moment."

"Bring them over here!" Franki exclaimed, throwing an impromptu solution into the stalled conversation. "It's the only reasonable thing to do. We've got plenty of room; we've got two empty apartments; we've got food and water; and between the six of us and Father Lantini, we can take care of them. For a while at any rate."

It was decided. Braving their own destruction and beneath the continuous roar of aircraft overhead; against a backdrop of intermittent explosions, the bombs falling with callously indifferent randomness, the group made their way to the smoking shell of the building that had once been the church. There, from amid the shattered brickwork and splintered timbers, from among crackling flames licking at heaps of burning debris, they gathered the children. And over a path strewn with broken bricks, crumbled plaster and great chunks of shattered masonry, they made their perilous way back to the Winiarnia.

Now arrived, they gave the children some food and calmed their fears to some extent. Lari, Stasi and Dani took to caring for the children, while the men began no small amount of discussion as to what to do next. It was readily evident that the children could not remain indefinitely. And while sheer fortune, along with his presence of mind, had moved Padre to bring the children's papers from the files of the orphanage, such fortune also made it clear that travel would be dangerous if not impossible.

“If we could only get them to Rome,” Padre said anxiously. “At least they’d be safe there. But many of these little ones are Jewish, and there are borders to cross, borders now controlled by the Germans. They’ve taken Austria and Czechoslovakia already, of course. But if we could make our way south into Hungary, to Bucharest and then into Yugoslavia, our next stop could be Venice. But it’s the papers that are the real problem.”

Franki looked meaningfully at André. Fully aware of his companion’s craft as a printer, cognizant also of his inordinate skill as a counterfeiter, he said, “Can you do anything about that, André?”

André thought for but a moment. Then nodding he said, “I can try, but we don’t have much time.”

Talented artist that he was, and over the next several days, André, along with other talented friends from the Lwów Stamp Club, worked at modifying some of the documents, falsifying others and generating new ones where necessary. In the end, by the morning of the 15th, he had eliminated all traces of Jewish ancestry from the children’s papers. More than that, all of them were now Roman Catholics.

“And I’ve done something else,” he announced on that same morning. “I’ve forged a Vatican Travel Order that will ... ”

“You’ve what?” Lantini exclaimed. “You couldn’t possibly!”

André turned to look at the priest, his eyes sparkling with mischievous wisdom. “Oh, yes,” he said. “I could possibly, and I did.” And with that he handed the paper to Lantini.

Looking at the document now in his hand, and not believing it possible, the priest said, “But this is ... this ... It’s incredible! The pope could not have done it as well!”

There followed a burst of quiet laughter; and as the amusement subsided, André pointed at the paper Lantini was holding. “That document,” he said, “will serve to get two priests and your two hundred children past any European border en route to the Vatican.”

And now both of the clergy looked at André, their eyes bright with appreciation and tears. “We ... we don’t know quite what to say,” Padre began.

“Then say nothing,” André replied.

There was an emotion-filled silence that followed before Franki said quietly, “I’ve something to offer as well.” As they listened, he went on.

“I want you all to know that I’ve been to the local post office. Now, by using what postal authority I have from Gdansk, I’ve sent a telegram to Carlo in Volargne. I told him that we were going to need some assistance with the children’s travel from the Brenner Pass. I said that ... ”

Lantini interrupted. “But we’re not going through the Brenner ... ”

“Yes, I know,” Franki interjected, “and so does Carlo. But the Germans don’t.”

“But how could you ... and who is Carlo?”

“Because I’ve confused them ... and Carlo is Victor’s father,” Franki explained, interrupting Lantini’s curiosity, his eyes sparkling with his own cleverness. “Using hints such as Victor and I once used on the potluck stamp packages we sold at the Wininarnia stamp club meetings, I told Carlo that while Padre was en route he would purchase a complete mint set of commemorative stamps, those memorializing Ceferiada’s seventieth anniversary this year, and that he would have them ... ”



“The what?” said Lantini, fully confused by what Franki was saying.

Franki looked at him hard. “The Ceferiada,” he explained, mildly impatient, “the celebration of the opening of Romania's first railroad station in eighteen sixty-nine. But that's beside the point. The point is that Padre is to have them postmarked by the issuing post office. Well now, Carlo knows that the issuing post office was Bucharest. And while Bucharest will be your route, it is *not* en route to the Brenner pass.”

Lantini smiled now. “Oh,” he said, understanding clearly now. “Well and good. But how do we know that this Carlo understands that ... ”

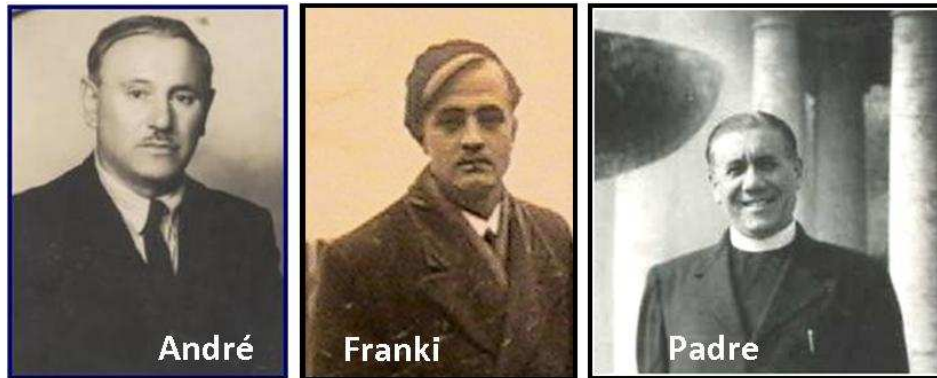
So when he replied,” Franki interrupted again, holding up a hand, “Carlo confirmed his understanding by suggesting that Padre also pick up some other stamps; a mint corner block commemorating Hitler's fiftieth birthday, and have it also postmarked by its issuing post office. Now Carlo knows very well that this stamp was issued in Braunau, Austria.”

The two priests sat down as Franki went on. “Now there's nothing sophisticated about any of this; it's childishly simple; it's dirt simple. And there are very few who know these things except stamp collectors. And here's the part I really like: even if a smart Gestapo stamp collector were to read the telegrams, what would he think? Probably that a couple of beginners were talking way over their heads.

“So Carlo knows that Padre and the children will be arriving in Italy on an Innsbruck train connection, and not from the Brenner pass. Carlo has also confused things further by saying that, ‘*buses will be provided when Padre Michele calls him by phone from the Pass.*’ He goes on then in his answer to tell us that more Zlotys are to

found under a floorboard in Luigi's bedroom, and that these are to be given to you, Padre."

It was the last thing needed. There were smiles all around and it was finally Padre who said, "I've got to hand it to you Franki; you and André are really a pair!"



The following day pulsed with hopeful activity as they prepared for their journey to Rome. The girls focused principally on things of a maternal nature, while the men looked to the heavier work and the hard core of organization. But overlaying all was an ominous pall of anxiety. Being keenly aware that Polish partisans were poised in Lwów, preparing to fend off an invasion by Germany's Wehrmacht, the urgent matter of getting out of Poland had become of paramount importance. But what came as a total shock was Padre's announcement on the 17th.

"Really!" was André's surprised response as Franki walked in to join him and Padre in the room. "When did you learn that?"

"Learn what?" Franki queried.

André looked at him with concern. "Russia invaded Poland this morning. Padre just told me."

Franki was stunned, puzzled. "That can't be true," he murmured, his countenance a mirror of his disbelief. "How ...? They can't do that! We've already been invaded by the

Germans, so how ... ? There's been no declaration of war with Russia, and ... and what about the Germans?"

"What indeed!" Padre replied, his cynicism beyond masking. "It seems that back in late August Mr. Molotov and Mr. Ribbentrop, the Russian and the German foreign ministers got together." He folded his arms now, pursed his mouth and looked at the ceiling. Nodding philosophically he said, "It appears that the Russians and the Germans are planning to split up Northern and Eastern Europe among themselves."

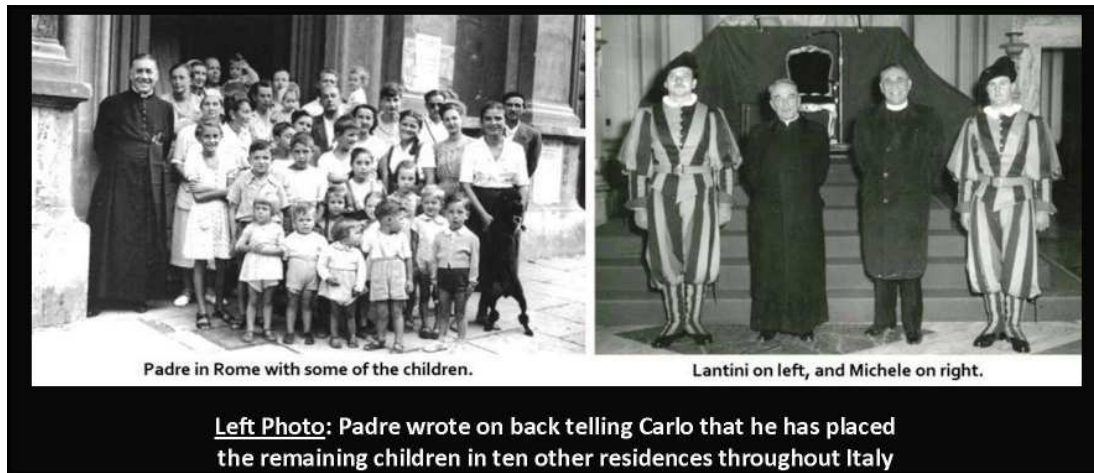
"Well then," André observed reflectively, "we have enemies on both flanks, do we not?" Then looking at Padre he said, "Best you and your friends get moving as quickly as possible. We have no idea of what these Russians are up to."

Padre nodded soberly. "Yes, you're right. And since I've never liked long good byes, André, I'll say mine now. And Franki ... you and the girls take good care. I'll hope to see all of you down the road somewhere."

They had money now, thanks to the generosity of Carlo's family, and with it they bought a team of horses. Along with the horses they bought a covered, double-trailer hay wagon. Then after distributing the remainder of the money among the children, some 5,600 Zlotys, and this that not all of it might be lost, damaged or confiscated in one fell swoop, they began their trek to the west.

It would take them two weeks, and they would pass numerous checkpoints manned by Nazi soldiers. But never once would André's clever counterfeit Vatican travel

orders fail their purpose. Upon reaching Bucharest, they would board a train to Innsbruck. From there, another train would take them to Rome.



It is reported to have been Aeschylus, a 6th century Greek playwright from the Hellenic city of Eleusis, who coined the phrase, “In war, truth is the first casualty.” Whether that be an ironclad fact or not, the observation stands immutable. It is politically and strategically unavoidable that information exchanged among nations be self-serving in nature, that national securities be maintained at all costs.

“National security:” An oxymoronic catchphrase – an operation, or operations, by means of which all manner of devious machinations and falsehoods may be, and are, perpetrated. Pacts and concordats are repeatedly seen to mean nothing – witness the “winning of the West” in America’s earlier years. A treaty becomes, in actuality, nothing but a treatise; naught but a formally drafted account dealing with whatever subject happens to be at issue. There is, therefore, no “National security,” nor can there ever be. As for the 1939 non-aggression pact entered into by Germany and Russia, the touchstone of time would prove it to be no different.

Doubtlessly, Premier Joseph Stalin himself had sensed the fragility of the matter. For when Germany's Foreign Minister to Russia, Joachim Von Ribbentrop, had initially offered Hitler's proposal that Germany and Russia enter into such a pact, a non-aggression pact, it had been suggested that it be binding for a hundred years. Stalin had responded to the effect that people would think them foolish for even considering such a thing, and had then suggested a ten-year period. Ribbentrop had said he would need Hitler's approval for the change; and after a trip to Berlin and after returning it was agreed.

Stalin himself had been present when the signing had taken place. With him, and actually putting their names to the paper, were his minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, and of course, Von Ribbentrop. And due to those few seemingly innocuous strokes of the pens, things were made to move very rapidly for la familia Perantoni and their friends.

Europe was beginning to burn.

No sooner had the Germans occupied Poland from the west, than they ceded half of the country to communist forces from Russia in the east. Thus, in conformity with the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement, Lwów had been made an outright gift to the Soviet State. And now – at least for the present – it was the sickle and hammer that flew over the city. Russian troops now occupied Lwów.

Using a time-tested method of social disruption, an operation at least as old as Syria's invasion of Samaria in the 9th century B.C.E., a machination designed to infuse political and military impotency into an enemy, Russian authorities proceeded to set about relocating families in Poland. Much was made of it in the newsreels of the day; that after suffering in basements under German domination, these abused Polish families

would now be living in what the press, ever politically discreet, deceptively called “fine new apartments.”

Should truth be known however, the Russians were moving them to apartments already occupied by as many as twelve other families. Among the many hundreds of thousands uprooted in this fashion, each of whom would be irretrievably scarred by the tragedy of those war-shattered years, was Victor Perantoni’s theater-oriented girlfriend, the ballerina Stasia Alexiniska. And as it was with each of those pitiable individuals, hers too was felt to be a crushing burden.

It was a cool afternoon in late September of 1939. Stasia, her head down and tears streaming from eyes grown far too weary to cry, sat with her friend, Larisa Doroshenka, on the porch of a state-owned farmhouse. But unlike Stasia, Ukrainian-born Larisa from a neighboring farm, was a girl altogether familiar with the rural life.

“I understand,” Lari was saying, her voice tender and a comforting arm around her friend’s shoulder. “But you can get through this, Stasi; you *will* get through this. We all will – somehow.”

Stasia shook her head in hopeless despondency. “I’m not sure,” she said. Then looking up at Lari: “I don’t know if I can handle this. I’m ... I’m no farmer’s daughter, Lari. I’m a ballerina. My family are not farmers; we never have been. I’ve always lived in a town. My life is music and the theater. And this ... this matter of working on a farm, a Soviet farm; more than that even, an *army* farm, is ... is such a radical change. Oh Lari, Lari! I am so very unhappy; so absolutely miserable!” And she bowed her head as the sobbing resumed.

“O my dear Stasi; you poor dear girl. Would that I could change things for you, indeed for us all.” Then patting Stasi’s shoulders, Lari looked about at their bleakly austere surroundings, the stark countryside. “But there’s something you need to remember; something we all need to remember about being happy; something that’s very easy to forget.” Again Stasia looked up.

“My grandmother once told me,” Lari went on, “that happiness doesn’t depend upon where you live or where you are. It doesn’t depend on your circumstances.” She paused thoughtfully and then said, “Think about the Perantonis. Now they’re a wealthy family, or that is to say they were. But now Carlo and Luigi are in Volargne, along with the rest of the family, and Victor is with relatives in Switzerland. They’d all like to be at home; but they’re having to put up with the same difficulties that we are. So happiness obviously doesn’t come from having a great deal of money. No, ‘Happiness,’ my grandmother said, ‘is a city in the state called Mind.’ That’s the way she put it. ‘A city in the state called Mind.’ Call it ... call it an attitude, Stasi; and ... ” She looked intently into her friend’s eyes ... “it’s an attitude we both must cultivate. We have no choice.”

As the tear-filled weeks became months, as they struggled at maintaining the attitude Lari had described, it became a time in which Stasi would find relative comfort in Lari’s companionship, a time when a strong bond would form between them. She was also able to experience a much needed sense of accomplishment, as she involved herself in sharing with Lari some of the aspects of ballet. Lari, on the other hand, continued to encourage her friend, helping her to eke out at least a measure of contentment from her unfamiliar bucolic surroundings. Even so, there proved to be many occasions when Lari too found ample reason to weep.