

CHAPTER I

Three days have passed since the never-to-be-forgotten tragedy in New York City. Friday, the 14th of September 2001 sees a humid evening in Orlando, Florida, unusually humid for this time of the year. Blowing in from off Lake Weston, bringing the smells of autumn and disturbing the air occasionally, is a pleasant, island-like breeze.

Earlier he had strolled across the lakefront lawn lying between his home and that of his father. And now George Perantoni, his crisp white shirt open at the neck, sleeves rolled up, is seated on a deck that extends over the lake's placid water; a deck he and his brother Roberto had built twenty years earlier. It had been a gift to their father upon his retirement, a deck he had promised his father would survive any hurricane ... survive even Armageddon!

In company with his 90 year-old father Vittorio, known to his friends as Victor, they have been in animated discussion over a rare Italian stamp. Understood by knowing philatelists to be a forgery, the stamp bears the likeness of Benito Mussolini, Italy's fascist leader in the early decades of the 20th century.

Using his pet name for Robert, Victor said, "Have you spoken with Beto?"

George looked up from scanning the stamp with a magnifying glass as Victor casts a critical eye on a glass of wine he is enjoying.

"Oh, yes. They're on the road, he and Mary; they left Milwaukee this afternoon and expect to arrive here in a couple days. Roberto said not to worry if he's late; he's expecting huge traffic delays. Since that New York thing, half of America is on the road. Nobody's flying." And his attention returned to the stamp.

Victor nodded and swirled the wine gently, noting of the cling – the “fingers” on the interior of the glass. “Hmm, not bad; it’s nice.”

Looking up again from the stamp and glancing at his father, George said, “It’s certainly an unusual one, Dad.”

Victor shook his graying head and smiled. “No, not the stamp, George, the wine; the *wine* is nice. But you are right; the stamp is unusual.” Then after a pause, his lilting accent unmistakably laden with the flavor of Italy, he continued.

“I canna remember ... I canna remember when la nostra familia used to make wine like this.” Then shaking an admonishing finger at the glass he added, “*Better* than this.” Then reflectively, “But O ... that was such a long time ago.

“I canna remember too, evenings like this in Italy, in the summer when it was warm. I would sit as we are sitting now, with your grandfather, and he and I would look at the stamps together.” Now he folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. Staring vacantly into space he said, “It was such a good time, George – a really good time.”

George laid down the magnifying glass. “And then it all changed, didn’t it, Dad.”

Silent tears suddenly glistened in Victor’s aging eyes. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, it all changed: our wine business; la Winiarnia; la mia cara Polonia; even la bella Italia. *Tutto* – everything!” A sigh and a plaintive whisper as he added, “It all changed.”

With the back of a thumbnail, George scratched one of those inexplicable itches on the side of his nose and looked at his father with a skewed expression. “But why, Dad?”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” A cynical chuckle and an empty smile. And now a sip from his glass before Victor suggested, “You may just as well ask me why the World Trade Center

three days ago, George. Who's to know what goes on in the minds of madmen?" A hopeless shake of his head now, and a puckered mouth. "I could give you a lot of examples, but it would only spoil this quiet evening and waste this fine wine. You just enjoy the stamps, George, and let me enjoy the sunset."

He eased his aging frame from his chair now, and went to walk along the water's edge. He walked slowly, hands clasped behind his back, his eyes fixed on the handsome, mossy-green cedars growing on the far side of the lake. Rising up behind them and as though in competition, other trees blazed in regal autumn colors: reds and golds, and burgundies; now and then one in flaming yellow. But such beauty could not ease his troubled mind; a mind unable to divorce the recent brutal attack on New York's twin towers from two similar attacks – altogether as brutal and every bit as sudden – on the two cities of his childhood, attacks he had experienced and which had robbed him of his youth.

So while George's attention remained focused on his father's collection of pre-war Polish stamps, Victor's mind drifted back to those two cities, to Lwów in Eastern Poland and to Volargne di Dolcé, in the Valpolicella region of Northern Italy. Happy days they had been. And Lwów in particular had been where he had acquired a great part of the collection that now held his son's rapt attention – a collection that had nearly cost him his life at the outset of World War II in 1939.

By the time of Victor's birth there in 1912, an Italian with Austria-Hungarian citizenship, later to be Italian and then Polish due to the idiosyncrasies of European administrations following the Great War of 1914, Lwów was already a richly multi-cultured city of great antiquity, having at various times been the possession of Germany,

Russia, Poland and Austria-Hungary. The city's name, therefore, and according to one's language, had more than one pronunciation. To Ukrainians it was *Lviv*, only somewhat different. To the Russians it was *Lvov*. But the meaning in both languages was the same: *Lions*. To Germans and Austrians it became *Lemberg*, originally *Lowenberg*, meaning *City of Lions*, while to Italians it was *Leopoli*, again with the same meaning. If circumstances required that he speak English, Victor preferred to use *Elvov*, while in Italian, if necessary, he would pronounce it *Levov*, when referring to it by its Polish name.

But however it was pronounced, its name from ancient medieval Latin – *Leopolis* – was recognized by all who lived there. And Victor loved his hometown, his birth town, preferring to pronounce its name only in Polish. For it was in this city that he had spent the happiest days of his youth, a city eventually lost to the Nazis in 1939, and later to the Soviets.

The old man had returned to his seat now, and his eyes were bright with more pleasant memories. “As to your question, George,” he began, “simple courtesy demands an answer; so just let me say that it all changed because of the second world war. It all changed in a single day – September 1, 1939 – the day Germany attacked Poland. But I don't want to talk about that, not now. Instead, let me take you back ten years before that, back to nineteen twenty-nine. Let me tell you what it was like during those years; the best days of my youth they were.

“True that the stock market had crashed, and the entire world was experiencing a great economic depression, but we didn't feel it because it actually caused our wine sales to increase! Life was so great back then, really *great*. Even so, I seldom talk of this much

because ... well, because many of the good memories too often lead to unpleasant ones. But tonight just seems like a good time to share them with you.”

He paused now, allowing his eyes to gaze unseeingly out over the lake and while George refilled both wine glasses, closed the case containing the collection, and sat back to listen as Victor said, “The world was so much quieter then, and I was seventeen ... huh huh, seventeen.” And he shook his head, smiling at the memory. “I’d come home to Lwów after completing high school in Italy; in Volargne, and your grandfather, Carlo, introduced me to a client of his, a printer whose name was Frodel, André Frodel.

“Now he was thirty-nine at the time, twenty-two years older than I was, but we became very close friends.” A look of curiosity on George’s face and Victor responded. “I know, you’re probably thinking it was more likely that he should have been your grandfather’s friend; and of course he was. But our mutual love of philately, of collecting stamps, and his youthful enthusiasm for such collecting and trading – and this despite his age, or maybe because of it – was the bond between us. It was the beginning of a long friendship, George. You should see the letters I have from him.

“Later, as André introduced me to several members of the Lwów Stamp Club, I learned that these were all very distinguished gentlemen, all prominent associates of Central Europe’s philatelic society – ‘the stamp collectors,’ people would call us. And I in turn acquainted him with some philatelist connections I had in Italy, and in Switzerland.

“Now then. I didn’t know it, but my life was changing; I was meeting a lot of older men. Because André – like I said, twenty-two years older – now introduced me to the President of the Lwów Stamp Club, a fellow by the name of Covasech; a man whose

name, curiously and regrettably, has disappeared from history. And after the introduction, André warned me.”

Surprised, George looked sharply at his father. “He warned you? Why?”

A sly smile, one that George knew well, warmed Victor’s smoothly weathered face. “Aaah!” he said. “That’s a story for later, for another time. But O the times we had together then. Many were the fun-filled evenings we spent together at your grandfather’s wine tavern. La Winiarnia Italia Inn it was called. Sometimes dad would join us, along with my older brother, your uncle Luigi, and we’d spend the whole evening trading stamps and playing cards – gambling; and the stamps made up the pot. And we’d eat! Oh, yes! Usually it was *pastasciutta*, the house specialty. Delicious *pastasciutta*! And the cooks would prepare it several different ways; all local Italian styles. My personal favorite was always *a la carbonara con pancetta*. And there was red wine. Oh, yes; always there was the wine!

“And the songs! Oh, loud boisterous songs, they were; all inspired by Italy’s fascist thinking, of course.” And he broke into a spontaneous ditty as the words flooded back to his mind. “... *Giovinezza ... Faccetta Nera ... Ciao Biondina ... Vincere ... Fiamme Nere* .” Then smiling sheepishly: “They were all songs of the fascist youth of Italy. And we had no idea; no idea at all of the horrors that lay ahead.

“And there was this Polish fellow, a university student he was. His name was Mrowicki, Franciszek Mrowicki. We just called him Franki for short. Anyway, he was a year older than I was, and through him I met Michele Kolbuch, a Vatican missionary priest that we all called ‘Padre,’ and who was older than both of us. He was twenty-six.

Back then we were all Catholics, of course, and we were all ardent philatelists; André and Padre having been loyal clients at your grandfather's Winiarnia Italia for several years."

Over the next half hour or so, largely in response to George's queries, the old man went on about the family's early years; about his grandfather's wine exporting business and about the winery tavern there in Lwów. And it was inevitable that the pending rise of fascism in Europe would incise its way into the conversation. And it was finally with tears brimming that Victor suddenly lashed out, reviling Hitler and Mussolini, both of whom he charged with costing him the loss of the two beloved cities of his youth, Volargne and Lwów.

With acid contempt and his dark eyes snapping he said, "And I can still remember the day that Hitler and Mussolini came to our Winiarnia."

"You met Hitler?" George exclaimed quietly. "Really? Wow! Now that must have been something."

"No," said the old man softly, shaking his head; fingers stroking a lightly unshaven chin. Then the same hand waved about as he said, "Actually it was more like *nothing*. Because back then it was Mussolini who was the world famous figure; he was the one who got all my attention. Hitler was with him, but he meant nothing to me at the time. Actually he meant little to most people outside Germany. He was not then the infamous *Führer*; he was not even Germany's chancellor, not yet. What he was, was a copy-cat; he was going to copy-cat Mussolini's way of doing things. Matter of fact, it's been said that in her memoirs, Mussolini's wife, Donna Rachele, wrote that in the early days her husband used to call Hitler '*una scimmietta*,' 'a silly little monkey,' as in 'Monkey see, monkey do'."

George smiled at the sarcasm as a yawn distorted Victor's next words. His mouth widening he said, "Oh, how the table turned years later. But remind me to tell you more about that at another time. It's getting late now. Go home George; give my love to Valerie and go to bed."

Indeed, dusk had fallen and fireflies could be seen sparkling in the low shrubbery as George stood. He hugged his father and turned to leave. As the old man finished his wine he watched his son walk home across their lakefront yard. Even at that moment, in the midst of Lake Weston's peaceful twilight, Victor knew that his own sleep would be troubled. It had happened before, when talk of Mussolini and of Hitler had dredged up too many unpleasant memories.

For as they had spoken he had been reminded of the hatred he had felt for Hitler's Nazism, and his great disappointment in Mussolini's Fascism; this for their having initiated World War II, and all the misery and suffering which it produced. He remembered also the miserable conditions of his Ukrainian friends in Lwów and regions of southeast Poland; social conditions which had sometimes triggered armed attacks on Polish military barracks and police stations. This by irate Ukrainians protesting their oppression.

And he remembers that there had been more than ample reason for such displays of rebellious discontent. Because even before the war, in the early 1930s, thousands of Ukrainians comprising the intelligentsia: the university professors, the writers, poets and playwrights; the musicians and the artists whose loyalties were suspect by the dread *Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del*, or NKVD, the Soviet Secret Police, were arrested

and subsequently vanished. It was a period of time that came to be called the *Rozstrilaniy vidrodzhennia*, the "Executed Renaissance" of Ukrainian literature.

Added to that was the memory of Stalin's banning of Ukrainian churches, both Orthodox and Catholic. The Russian Orthodox Church alone was allowed to function. Little wonder then that many Ukrainians, in and around Lwów, believed there could be nothing worse than Communist Russian slavery. And they consequently, though naively, welcomed the German Army; an Army representative of what they understood to be a cultured nation.

Regrettably, as would later be the situation between Russia and Poland in the 1940s, Ukrainians were unaware that Nazi ideology classified them as *Untermenschen*, that is to say, people less than human. As regards their land, the so-called "Breadbasket of Europe," the black earth of which is some of the richest agricultural land in the world, it was Hitler's racist design to colonize it with a German population. He had in mind, in fact, as with the Jewish people, the total extermination of the Ukrainians.

Particularly bitter was one memory: that following the Russian-Ukrainian surrender after the Battle of Kiev in 1941, when a total of 665,000 soldiers were captured by the Germans, these men who had so willingly surrendered, were intentionally starved to death; or they died of exposure in open-air concentration camps during the 1941-1942 winter. And it was but only two weeks after Germany's invasion, when the Nazis began their open persecution of the Ukrainian nation.

On December 16th, then, in 1942, it is recorded that Hitler ordered the use of – in his words – the “most brutal means” against guerrilla fighters in Ukraine, “even against women and children.” And he recalls that for three years, Ukrainians throughout Galicia

suffered terribly under the Nazi occupation, while in Lwów and its nearby communities the remaining Poles suffered as much.

Such thoughts as these would bedevil him through the dark hours. And if he did sleep, they would lace his dreams. It would be an uneasy night.

“I thought it would be a good idea,” said Victor, having resumed his story telling on the following evening, “to have monthly meetings at the Winiarnia. I thought it could be good for business.”

Sitting with his wife Gina in the patio of George and Valerie’s home, the four of them watched a fiery autumn sunset paint the western sky with flamboyant colors. With cold orange juice in glasses, they listened as he began to explain how he had convinced his father, Carlo, that a swap-meet for their philatelic friends might very well prove to be a business advantage. “I had also come to know something about André,” he said.

And George remembered. “Does this have anything to do with the warning you mentioned last evening?”

The crafty smile again, the little crow’s feet crinkling at the corners of his eyes. “Yes, as a matter of fact, it does. You see, André had told me, confidentially of course, that if I allowed Covasech to trade stamps with me that I’d lose my shirt! And André was right. On that very night, in fact, this Covasech fellow obtained from me the first two series of Italian postage stamps; those of eighteen sixty-three and eighteen seventy-nine.

Italy's first stamp series 1863 and 1879

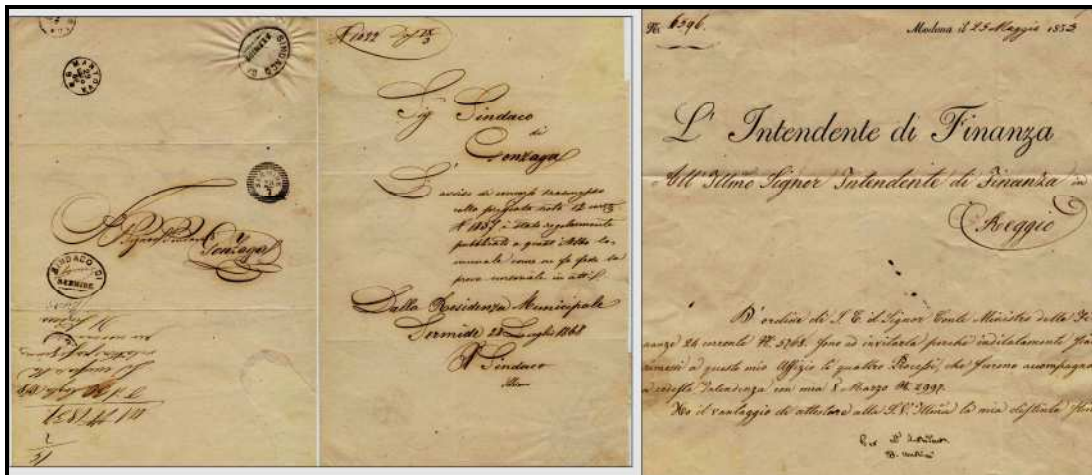


“And you got from him ... ?”

“Ha ha ha ha. From him I got one complete set of commemorative stamps.” A deep sigh before he added, “Which he had made himself!”

“He what?” George exclaimed, the words punctuating a soft laugh. “He made stamps?”

“Yes, and I understand your surprise. But can you just imagine that? Stamps that he made himself! With no authority whatever, he had made commemorative stamps. And on top of that, about five hundred of these were actually mailed and postmarked! And he had some of those also. So now he wanted to trade some of his postmarked envelopes, bearing his stamps, for some old Italian letters that he knew I had, letters that were mailed *before* there were any postage stamps in Italy. Now that’s going back to before eighteen sixty-three. Attractive letters, hand written in gorgeous calligraphy.



“Oh, he was a tricky man to trade with, George, because knowing that I had several of such letters, he *really* wanted them. But this time I remembered André’s warning, and I refused to trade with him; like I’m a little smarter now; right? WRONG! What a mistake that was!”

“Oh? Why Dad?”

"Because, my boy, those stamps – those unauthorized stamps which Mr. Covasech had made – have become so *very rare* that modern catalogs don't even list them. Oh, I've been kicking myself in the seat of my pants ever since! Because the last listing of Covasech's stamps was in the German catalog – the *Michel Briefmarken Katalog* of nineteen forty. After that ... nothing; it's as if they never existed!"

George's brow now furrowed with confusion. As he refilled his glass with juice. he said, "But I don't get it, Dad. Because if the stamps were not official, wouldn't they just be ... Could you explain that?"

“Oh, yes. You see, son, Mr. Covasech had been a mail officer in the Austria-Hungarian Army during the Great War, World War One; he had been a lieutenant. Now in October of nineteen seventeen ... about ... aaah ... about eighty-four years ago next month, with the war at it's height and following the battle of Caporetto, Austria-Hungary had successfully occupied eighteen small towns in Northern Italy. But their army's mail van had been completely destroyed during one of the battles; it had been burned. So lieutenant Covasech, acting on his own authority as the mail officer in charge, and claiming, of course, to be acting in the interest of soldier morale at a time of a military postal crisis, saw the situation as a prime opportunity to issue *provisional* stamps – stamps which he knew all along would become a very limited and rare item.”

And now it was Valerie, her dark Latin eyes bright with interest, who voiced her confusion. “But it seems to me that if there were no stamps to be had, why couldn't this Covasech fellow have just ... ”

“Moved mail without any stamps?” Victor interjected.

“Well ... yeah!”

“O you’re absolutely right, Val.” And Victor shook an acknowledging finger toward her. “He could have done just that. But ... fanatical philatelist that he was, he seized the opportunity to manufacture his own stamps – *commemorative* stamps. He designed eighteen sets of four stamps each, a complete series of seventy-two stamps to memorialize the eighteen towns they had recently captured.”

As with Valerie, George was now virtually consumed with curiosity. “But how, Dad; how did he do it?”

“Oh, he was clever, George, he was *una volpe* – a fox. I swear; between him and André, I don't know who was the better. He used – can you imagine this – local matchbook tax seals. These were gummed stamp-like seals produced for the Italian matchbook monopoly, and he overprinted them with the Austrian word *Ortspostmarke* in four colors, to represent four monetary denominations. Then he overprinted the names of the eighteen Italian cities which had been captured by his army, with each city in four denominations, thus making complete sets of seventy-two *gummed tax-seal stamps*, commemorating their recent eighteen victories. Two days later, when a replacement mail van was furnished, he destroyed all remaining sheets of his provisional stamps; with the exception, that is, of five complete sets. And I am the fortunate owner of one of those very rare sets.”

"So why kick yourself in the seat of your pants?"

"Because, George!" and now his excitement grew. "During the first two days after that battle, those encamped Austrian troops sent letters home using Covasech's stamps! And he, Covasech, *personally* postmarked and initialed each letter himself. And those stamps are *extremely rare*, because they were only in circulation for about sixty hours. And even though I own a complete mint set ... " He grew wistful now. "... it would be really wonderful if I also owned only a few of those postmarked letters to go with my set, and to validate their usage. Fortunately I have the *1940 Michel Briefmarken Katalog*, and I can use that to prove the existence and circulation of these very rare stamps."



“But getting back to André: Remember that I said he was a printer? Well, he was also a very talented artist. And that, coupled with his printer’s skills, made him a very accomplished counterfeiter!”

“But Dad, that would ... ”

“Be illegal? Yes, George; yes it would be illegal. That is, if he had used his skills to defraud the Postal System, or to even cheat stamp collectors. But he was an honest man, and he never defrauded anyone. So, like Covasech, André never did this to deceive. With him it was a ... well, it was a hobby; he made counterfeit stamps as novelties. Why, we even used to award them as door prizes during the Winiarnia’s stamp meets.”

On he went, then, telling of how they had made fancy invitational postcards, each of which bore legal postage, but with a simulated stamp placed at the center. And on that stamp was the face of Benito Mussolini, Italy’s dictator – Europe’s rising superstar.

The old man grinned now with remembered satisfaction. “You can imagine what a success *they* were! And postal clerks too, enjoyed adding their own touch, putting collector-quality cancellation marks on these mock stamps. Well, they soon became the talk of all Italy – of Europe even, causing a buzz of confusion among collectors in those countries who had never seen a Mussolini stamp.

“However, and rightly so I now realize, my father was outraged. You see, despite his position – Honorary Vice Consul of Italian Affairs in South Eastern Poland – his politics, like those of so many during this time in history, were somewhat confused. His loyalty, he felt, was to the king, Victor Emmanuel the third, Italy’s proper king, and not to Mussolini. Actually, I think he named me after King Victor. So to see this stamp – this

symbol of fascist youth – along with the Winiarnia’s address, Ulica Sykstuska 29, on his son’s invitational postcards; well, it was just not acceptable.

“Even so, the meetings became very popular. So much so that early one morning in nineteen twenty-nine, the Italian Consul in Warsaw called my father. You’ll never guess what he said.”

There was a long pause before George said anxiously, “So what did he say?”

Spreading his hands as though helpless, waving them about with typical Italian enthusiasm, Victor said, “He told my father that Mussolini – IL Duce himself, with an entourage of thirteen others – were flying from Vienna to Warsaw, and that he had decided to make an unscheduled landing in Lwów. Later I found out that one of those in the group was Adolf Hitler, leader of Germany’s growing Nazi party.”

“Ah hah! So that was when you met Hitler.”

“Yes, that was the time, George. But right then transportation was the issue; everybody suddenly needed transportation to the Winiarnia. And lunch reservations were needed, and these for fourteen people. Furthermore, the Consul had also ordered that the Winiarnia be closed to the public during the visit. So my father doesn’t like this, but what can he do? Luigi and I are set to cleaning the hall and getting a menu ready, while your grandfather Carlo scuttles about, trying to locate five cars – five *deluxe* cars – to transport fourteen people.

“Well, the cars were had; the lunch was a success; and it turns out that your grandfather was delighted. And afterwards? Afterwards there were several impromptu stamp presentations and some trading. Even IL Duce got involved. Just imagine – the leader of the Partito Nazionale Fascista! He too was an avid philatelist, and he traded me

ten PNF party badges for ten of André's "Duce art-stamps" with his image. Then came an even greater surprise. Mussolini *personally* initialed two corner blocks from André's fake stamp sheets; one for André and one for me. And as a joke he commissioned me to oversee all of the Fascist party's future stamp printing. And I remember that we all laughed at that."

George refilled his glass yet again. "And what was Hitler doing all this time?"

"Oh, he was enjoying himself. Particularly he seemed to enjoy the lively conversation with the younger set of the group, about the Great War – that's what everyone called the First World War. Well ... since then we've seen the second, of course, and the word *great* has taken on a different meaning.

"Anyway, as he talked on about how that war was lost, and why it was lost, I noted that Hitler appeared to take great pleasure in assigning blame. While granting that the so-called Central Powers had lost the war – he had no choice, of course – he insisted it was not the fault of the *people* of Germany and Austria, nor of their soldiers. Oh, no! No, he put the blame on the Hungarians; he blamed the Bulgarians; he blamed the Turks of the old Ottoman Empire. And it shouldn't surprise you that he blamed the entire Jewish race.

"O he was quite boisterous about it. In fact, he said Germany and Austria could have won the war all by themselves if these others hadn't been involved ... and if the Jews hadn't owned the wealth which governed the economy ... on both sides, that is. Oh! And though he had claimed that the German *people* were faultless, he strongly attacked the decisions of the German leadership. Kaiser Wilhelm was wrong; Paul Von Hindenburg was wrong; and for Franz Joseph First of Austria, he had nothing but utter contempt!

“And when it came to the Treaty of Versailles, he *really* started ranting away; blaming those *leaders* for having accepted the burdens of that Treaty. He literally shouted, ‘The Germanic people of Deutschland and Austria did *NOT* lose the war!’ Or something like that; that was the gist of it anyway. No, it was the leaders and their allies, he insisted.”

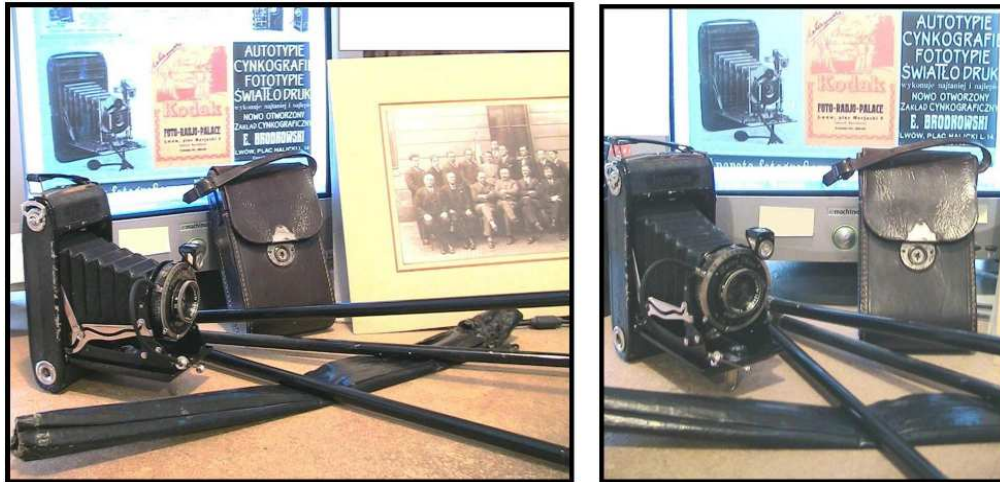
And now Victor shook his head. “Well, we all looked at him, because he was loud of course, but Hitler wasn’t the star of the show back then. No, it would be another four years before he’d even be Germany’s chancellor. And besides, this wasn’t Germany, this was our Italian winery tavern in Poland. And it was Mussolini – IL Duce and his closest companions – who were seen as the really important ones.”

Now he grinned, took a deep draft of his juice, and wiped his mouth with a knuckled finger. “Interestingly though, there was a point in the afternoon when Hitler hinted that I should ask André to make an imitation stamp with his picture also, like had been done for IL Duce! I say it was interesting because this man, this fascist leader, wanted *me* to arrange for his face to be on a fake stamp some eight years before the first Hitler stamps were officially produced in Germany.

“But I didn’t take him seriously, and it seemed like most of the guests seated there didn’t either. Because after all, who was he? A German politician with a jail record; in this country he would’ve been a gangster. And Mussolini? Well, he just ignored him. Personally, I felt that IL Duce may have been somewhat annoyed by Hitler, who was arrogantly blowing the Germanic trumpet about how the Great War was unjustly lost. And this in Mussolini’s presence, ignoring altogether that Mussolini himself had served

in that war, but on the opposite side! We didn't know then, of course, what a monster this Hitler would turn out to be.

“So now your grandfather, dear man that he was, thought it would be nice to have a picture of all of us together. So he got out his camera, an old Ziess Ikon Ikonta with an automatic shutter. And since I loved photography and I was pretty good at it, he asked me to arrange the group and to take the picture. I still have that camera.



“So I set up the chairs in our courtyard and mounted the camera on a tripod. Then inviting all the guests to take their places, I made sure that IL Duce sat in the center, the place of honor, right next to your grandpa Carlo. I didn't know what to do with Hitler, however, because the pastel plaid suit he was wearing made him look out of place. So I asked him to stand in the middle, flanked by the other taller guests in dark suits. And when everybody was in position, I set the timed shutter and ran to the back of the group. And there I stood, on a wine box and next to Italy's fascist flag, while the shutter went off. I still have that photo.”

“You do?” Valerie said perkily, expressing her surprise. “Could we see it?”

Victor looked at her and grinned.

When he returned from the house he was holding a box. Seated now, the box on his lap, he said, “Now there's an interesting story behind this photo. In fact, it just may be one of the rarest, certainly the most controversial, ever taken of Hitler”

As Victor removed the cover from the box, George said, “Oh, really! Why is that?”

The old man looked up from beginning to finger through the treasured collection of photos that meant so much to him. Twisting around to see his son, standing just behind his shoulder, he said, “Because many people won't believe it's true. You see, the history books say that Hitler and Mussolini had never met before nineteen thirty-four, and that was in Venice. June fourteenth, they say, and the history books are very specific about that. But ...”

And now he took a black envelope from the pile.

“... But this photo proves the history books to be wrong. Keep in mind a couple of things. First: that this is a genuine photograph! This picture was taken when there was no computer; and nobody ... no one would have even imagined *manufacturing* a picture; you know, putting people in places where they never were, or altering the faces, such as they can and do with digital photography today.

“The second thing to remember – and many forget this or never knew – is that Hitler had great respect, great admiration for Mussolini – Europe’s politician super-star – but the respect was not mutual. He also knew that IL Duce was open to meeting with political leaders, and especially young aspiring fascists who were sympathetic of the Blackshirt movement, and he did this often. So Hitler tried more than once to meet with Mussolini formally; and every time he was refused. Why? This was quite out of character

for Benito Mussolini, who was promoting worldwide fascism. Now there had to be a reason for Mussolini's contempt and his refusals; and it may well have originated from a previous introduction, such as at our Winiarnia Italia in nineteen twenty-nine.

“Also, Hitler had been a stumping politician about then. He's one year out of prison, and he's doing a lot of traveling, building up a following that would, and did, elect him chancellor of Germany four years later. So Hitler may have been anywhere about that time, even in places of which no one made any record. Considering that the Italian Consul had ordered that the Winiarnia be closed during the Mussolini lunch, then maybe even that Vienna to Warsaw flight was off the record too. So for Hitler to be on a plane with Mussolini, coming from Vienna, Austria, and in the company of other young aspiring fascists, would not have been at all unusual.

“But four years later, in nineteen thirty-three, after his appointment as Chancellor of Germany, Hitler had stated: ‘Now that I’m a head of state he’ll have to meet with me.’ But still Mussolini kept him waiting – another eighteen months, until June of ‘thirty-four when he finally agreed to meet the man. But ... when they did meet *officially* – in nineteen thirty-four as is publicly recorded – it was not to be in Rome. Oh, no! There would be no meeting at the capitol, in the heart of Italy. Instead, Mussolini would meet him in an *anteroom* to Italy, *Venice!* A city renowned for *tourism!* And following an unfortunate suggestion made by Ulrich Von Hassel, Germany’s ambassador in Rome, Hitler regrettably arrived dressed in civilian clothes. Well! Next to IL Duce, in full military regalia as the world’s leader of fascism, Hitler indeed looked like a tourist!

“But that meeting was staged; it got worldwide media coverage; there was a large military parade; it was for the public! And it was orchestrated to show Fascist Italy’s

superiority over Nazi Germany, and IL Duce's dominance over Hitler ... or maybe his disdain, for that too was noticeable."

"Now then ... " And he took the picture from its envelope.



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