

Lwów is a city destroyed. Not physically, although there was a great measure of that as well. But it was a city destroyed in every other way; its heart was gone – a city of atrocities; of squalor, depression and decay. As Victor walks its littered streets, he is nearly overwhelmed with the reek of corruption and death.

The city has become a world unto itself. It is now a landscape nearly as foreign to him as would be the surface of a planet in another solar system; and the stench is as that of a charnel house.

*What terrible crimes were theirs?* he wonders, passing here and there persons hung by their necks in trees. On city light posts as well, murdered citizens of Lwów have been hung in a similar fashion, their corpses now rotting in the heat of an early August afternoon. On the sidewalks and in the streets themselves, putrefying bodies of dead animals, fly-covered and larvae-infested, lie composting and ignored. Had he been asked at some time in the past to imagine the scene, it would have been impossible. For it was beyond imagination; it transcended human reasoning.

Here now in Poland, in Lwów, as had been the case for over a year, was the prototype. Victor was not altogether aware of it at the time, nor perhaps were most of the others who saw it. But here was the precursor of that which would earmark the Nazi presence throughout Europe until the mid-1940s.

He walked then to the Winiarnia, there to be staggered by the absolute purity of its desolation. As he wandered through the empty buildings, the Inn and the apartments, where he recalled saying goodbye to his family, to André, to Franki, and to Padre – and to his girlfriends, he remembered André having said, “In that way I can keep an eye on the winery until you re ...”

But they never did return. They had, although unknowingly, said goodbye to Lwów, and to the Winiarnia. They had said, “Arriverderci Leopoli.” It was all empty now. Ransacked and looted, it had become a place of nothing but gloom and sad shadows. The wine; the laughter; the cheese; and the unforgettable pasta with its tangy sauces – all were gone now. Only the echoes remained.

And he cried.

Then wiping his eyes on a sleeve, he went to what had been Luigi’s bedroom. And there, having viewed its stark emptiness he was about to turn away. But then he stopped. It seemed unbelievable, but there it was: the secret floorboard was untouched.

He knelt now and removed the board, eager to know if anything of importance might have been left by any of the friends – a message perhaps. Maybe the ravagers had missed something, something that he might well hold to be nothing short of a treasure.

And there in the recess, illuminated now by the watery summer sun that filtered in through a multitude of broken windows and other fractured openings, was a package. And in André’s inimitable handwriting he read the name, “Victor.” And thus it did prove to be a treasure. Indeed, more than a treasure.

As though he were a surgeon, his trembling fingers opened the package with great care. Glancing over his shoulder more than once, fearful now of being discovered, he gingerly sorted through the priceless contents. Yes! Yes, it all appeared to be intact. And a thrill went through him as he thought of André’s own hands carefully packaging these irreplaceable gems. For here, undisturbed, were André’s and Franki’s entire collections of stamps. They had been found as André had intended.

But there was more; there was a letter. And Victor set himself to reading it.

As he read, digesting every word, every thought, it became difficult for him to see. Tears welled again in his eyes, and he paused often to wipe them away with a knuckled finger. For he looked upon a message of ponderous sadness. André had recorded with him in mind – hopeful that he would be the one to find it – the terrible and frightening events that had occurred in Lwów following his having left for Switzerland.

André had written also of his assumption – one that proved prophetic – that he and Franki would soon be arrested and transported to Russia. Reflective of André's anticipation, he reads the words that implore him to safeguard their stamp collections until they can meet again. So on the moment, at least until that happy day in which they could be reunited, Victor determined that he would look after them for his two missing friends.

He had reached the end of the letter now, and he is puzzled. Reading portions yet again he notes that his friend has made no mention of the girls he had left behind: Dani, Stasi and Lari have apparently disappeared. No indication is given as to where they might be. Painfully aware now of what has happened here, it is a matter that both saddens and frightens him.