

Tableware lapsed into quietude, gradually becoming silent as they all waited. And Victor took time to butter his bread as he began.

“I was aah ... I was on the train, a couple hours west of Krakow – it would become a Jewish ghetto later, as some of you may remember – and the train had stopped at a border station in Czechoslovakia.” He paused now, as though wanting to forget something.

Then he continued. “As I looked out of the train’s window, there they were – the Gestapo, strutting about with their usual ‘I-own-the-world’ attitude. I mean they were everywhere, along with the soldiers! Well, these agents then boarded the train, and then ordered that all the passengers should take their passports, or whatever identification papers they had, and assemble on the station’s platform. But no luggage! Luggage was to be left on the train. And there the soldiers would *inspect* it, looking for ... (he shrugged) whatever they were after, and probably also taking whatever they wanted.

“So now we’re all standing on the platform, and the interviews begin. Now as this went on, German nationals and other diplomats – ones whom the Nazis considered to be *friendly* – were allowed to re-board the train. The rest of the passengers, myself included, were given the opportunity to voluntarily declare any contraband in our luggage or that we might be carrying on our person. Well, for me this was a *major* problem! Because, you see, under my clothes I’m carrying my valuable collection of stamps, and also a large sum of money – Polish Zloty!

“Now you may remember me telling you that when grandfather Carlo and the family left the Winiarnia, and when I headed for Switzerland, any amount of money over one hundred Zloty was considered to be contraband, and it was to be confiscated at the

border. So now here I am, at the border, and I'm carrying *fifteen thousand* Zloty ... in large banknotes!

"Now then. Those who failed to declare anything were ordered into the station's waiting room where they were to be strip-searched before they could re-board the train."

Valerie was effervescing with curiosity. "So what happened, Dad?"

"Patience, my daughter. I'm getting to it; I'm getting to it."

A bite of bread now, and a sip of his wine before he went on. "Now I had traveled that same train route before; numerous times in fact, while conducting the family's wine business. And I had never experienced, nor expected, such an intensive or severe search as was conducted upon my leaving Poland that day. But this was August of nineteen thirty-nine – the thirty-first actually. And while I didn't know it then, it was one day before to the invasion of Poland would occur.

"The Wehrmacht had already occupied what was then Czechoslovakia, and of course the Czech border was now being manned by German soldiers. So now the women were all made to line up facing the ladies restroom, and all the men were herded into another long line headed for the men's room."

Victor paused now, permitted himself another sip of his wine, and allowed the scene he had just painted to become near reality in the minds of his curiosity-saturated listeners. Then he resumed.

"Now while I'm waiting in this line – waiting to be strip-searched – you can just imagine that my feeling of anxiety had risen to ... well, it was at a level I'd never in my life experienced! And I would add, one that I never want to experience again! Even now I have a pretty good idea of how a person might feel on the way to their execution.

“Anyway, about the time I got to where the line curved around a corner, around to the men’s room, I learned something. I saw that after being searched, the men leaving the restroom went into another line, one waiting to re-board the train. You see the soldiers were still searching the luggage on board.”

Again he paused, a long pause. Then stratching his shoulders he said, “*Oh, cari figli miei* – Oh, my dear children. Would you mind if I finished this story another time?”

“Yes, I would!” George replied promptly, smiling at his father. “Speaking for myself, I’ve been waiting since last Sunday, Dad, and I’d *really* like to hear the end of this story; if that’s okay.”

Robert nodded. “If it’s not too much, I agree with George. Please, Dad?”

The old man smiled and sighed. Then using that pet name for his oldest son he said, “I suppose, Beto, that it does have kind of a ... kind of a drama about it, doesn’t it.”

“Oh, Dad!” Valerie exclaimed quietly. “You’re so dismissive about yourself at times! It’s *more* than drama; it’s ... it’s real! I mean this is *you*, Dad, going through all this. For us it’s like you’re a ... like you’re a hero in an espionage movie, or something.”

Old Victor allowed himself a sly smirk. “Well forget the hero part, Val. Because I will confess to you, and without any shame, that back then I felt more like a scared rabbit. So now getting back to the story – at your husband’s insistence – and like I was saying: as I looked over to my right, over to where the men were emerging from the restroom, I saw they were forming this other line.

“Now ahead of me there sat this German SS officer. Oh, and didn’t he think that he was a splendid looking fellow! Him in his black uniform with its red swastika

armband; with his polished black boots; and he was seated at a field table unfolded and set up in front of the restroom entrance.

“As each passenger approached he would call them over, one at a time, to check their identification papers. And he asked each man, once again, if he had any contraband to declare prior to entering the restroom where he would be stripped naked and searched. Oooh, the dread and tension I was feeling is indescribable. And right then I knew that I had to do *something*, and I had to do it right now; even something desperate.

“You see, the Germans considered all valuable art and collectibles to be *verboden* – forbidden, that is. Consequently even a single collectible stamp was considered to be contraband. And there I was, carrying about *five hundred* stamps strapped to each leg, inside my baggy knickerbockers! So ... ”

And there was that pause again; Victor was a storyteller.

“So ... ?” said Valerie.

“So I stepped out of the line.”

“You *what!*“ she blurted. “You might have been killed!”

“Well I didn’t think that would happen, Val; I didn’t think they’d start shooting inside the station. Actually, I didn’t know what would happen. But there are times when you just have to face the Devil, and face him down.

“So I walked over to this officer. Now try to visualize this: there he was intently examining another passenger’s passport ... he’s bent over this document-magnifying machine ... and when he looks up, there I am, flashing my PNF party badge in his face. And then I spoke to him in Italian – *l-o-u-d* Italian – and I backed it up with gestures. Oh, I mean gestures; forceful ones! You know how we Italians can be. I told him I was an

official of the Italian Consulate's Blackshirts in Warsaw; that I was the son of the Honorary Consul for the Fascio in Eastern Poland and the Galicia region; and that I was expected to attend an emergency meeting of the Blackshirts in Rome.

"Well, the man was speechless! So I went on. I explained that this delay was going to cause me to miss my Vienna connection, and that Mussolini – *his* Duce – would not, when he heard about it – and I'd see that he did – look with any measure of kindness upon this grievous inconvenience!"

"Dad!" Robert exclaimed..

"That's what I told him. O I had the bull by the horns, Beto! So now I concluded. Again in loud Italian, I demanded that the train be re-boarded *now*; and that it depart for Vienna immediately. And you know ... looking back now, I think I said all of that in virtually one humongous breath of hot air!"

While the family chuckled at his last remark, he said, "So now it was the officer's turn. So up he gets, pushes his desk and the other passenger aside, and steps up to me. I mean we're almost making physical contact. Standing about twelve inches taller, he shouted down onto my scalp a long string of nasty German words. One or two I could understand, but believe me, there was no need for translation. Then pointing with an outstretched arm he barked, '*Holen Sie!*' something or other. I didn't understand that either. But I remember that he showered me with spit as he hollered, and his meaning was clear: something like, 'Get back in line, or else!'

"However, the line he was *pointing* to was the one waiting to re-board the train! He had evidently assumed, incorrectly of course, that I had approached the desk from that line; that maybe I'd become annoyed while waiting for the re-boarding. But I'd made my

point now, so who was I to argue? So now I became very polite, very compliant, and having sidestepped the strip-search altogether, I cooperatively made myself part of the re-boarding line.” A mischievous grin and he paused briefly before adding, “By the way, the train did not depart immediately.”

Again the laughter at his last remark, and he smiled now. It was the smile of an old man who had done something foxy. He made a typical Italian gesture, shaking his hand with its fingers grouped together.

“But I got away with it, Beto!” An emphatic swing of his head as he repeated, “I got away with it. Oh!” And his eyebrows went up. “Just now I’m reminded of another story, one that happened on that same trip, but in Vienna. But that’s for later, not for now.”