

ARRIVEDERCI LEOPOLIS The Lion's War

*"...man has dominated man to his injury."
(Ecclesiastes 8:9)*

By George Perantoni and Sam Ivey

Based on a True Story

Set against the background of World War II, this is a story of the 20th century as experienced through the lives of an Italian wine exporter, his family and his friends.

Depicting historical events of the early 20th century, the First World War is seen as the precursor to the Second World War and then carried into the 21st century with the attack on the World Trade Center - 9/11/2001.

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... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 14 ...

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

... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 14 ...

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.

... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 19 ...

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.

... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 20 ...

Italy's first stamp series 1863 and 1879

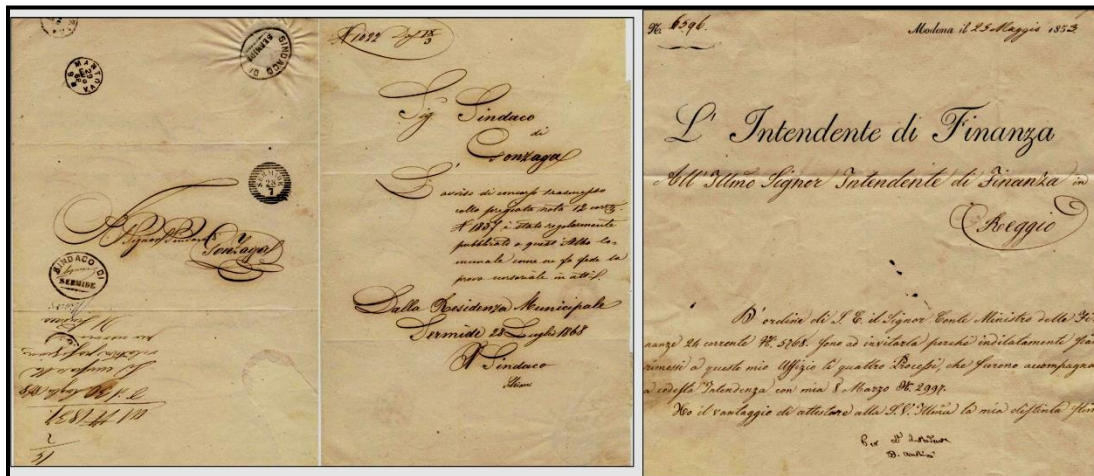


"And you got from him ... ?"

"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.



... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 21 ...

"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."

... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 22 ...

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."

... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 23 ...

"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."



... EXCERPT FROM PAGE 215 ...

been firmly of a mind that only a government by God himself would solve humanity's problems; would provide everlasting peace and a genuine security.

Even so, at the time he was still an avid philatelist at heart, maybe even a bit fanatic about his passion for stamps. And having previously had many contacts with the Mantova post office, being then keenly aware of the postal systems's lack of needed organization, he realized that therein lay an enormous opportunity; one to be seized on the moment and in the manner of the irrepressible lieutenant Covasech.

For he vividly recalled the understanding by that man – the Lwów Stamp Club's president – of the critical postal situation in the Austria-Hungarian army in 1917, how he had created his own set of commemorative stamps following the Battle of Caporetto. And now, in 1945, Victor had wanted to do a similar thing. Having then subsequently obtained the help and cooperation of the friends of Mantova's post office, he promoted the idea and then initiated the production of stamps – stamps which have become rare and renowned as the PSI MANTOVA overprints.



Circulated only by the Mantova post office and appearing nowhere else in Italy; existing but for the moment – only one issue ever being printed, Victor's PSI-MANTOVA stamp was to have commemorated the political and military reunification of Northern and ...