

The Russians are coming

by **Orazio Longo** © 2009 (Translation by Adriana Tonon)

Vespasiano knew exactly that there was little to fool with those people. Better answer their questions, quick. It wouldn't have taken them long to get him and let him rot at the bottom of a barrel with cockroaches and mice, the big ones, until he had made up his mind and spoke. After all they were so good at these kind of things, you know, as the last time.

He could still remember the stings on his nose and the electric discharges on his fingers. Excruciating pains. Immense. Unbearable. He thought he would have died. In Prague, ten years before.

There was still the Cold War and he was the lure for a bigger fish. Now, each time he touches his right ear it's as he could still feel the pain of the blade cutting his earlobe off, bare flesh. He had gained that ugly scar for good. As his fingers, his fore and little finger of his left hand which he was unable to move any longer. And now, every time he bended the other two, he made a "rock on". They had tortured him. And he couldn't bear it anymore. He had told them everything at last. Anything they had wanted to know. And even what they just hoped he would have told them.

Then luck was on his side and, by a miracle, he escaped. What an incredible escape. At first hung on a goods train; then hidden inside a heated compartment of a cold store in a Polish truck carrying ham. He arrived in South Tirol this way. Then, in Italy, on foot, across the Pusteria mountains. Through the woods. A long walk to The Three majestic Dolomites Peaks reaching the Comelico Valley at last.

He had done it. He had started to live again. He had shaved and cut his hair. He had even found a job. They paid him nothing, but it was enough for him. And for a while he had forgotten about the whole thing. But they were now back.

They were different from those in Prague, but it was always them. He knew it. He had recognized them at once. As soon as they had got off the brown station-wagon volkswagen, the old model. Typical. You can see hundreds

of them. Not to be showy they had left it at the square. The narrow squared square. One of the many in Comelico. Behind the fountain.

They had recognized him as well, instantly. Surely they must have kept his identikit and his old picture among the top-secret files of the archive department, anyway. Vespasiano had a terrible feeling. A cold shiver ran him from top to toe. In an instant it was as if those ten years had never passed. He had always had that story on his mind and he was still living and reliving it. He knew it wasn't over. He knew they would have come again. He had imagined that moment hundreds of times. And it was now happening.

«Good evening».

The tone was mellow. Almost friendly. They sat at Vespasiano's table. The only one taken among those that Geppi, the owner of the "Three Peaks Bar", had placed outside. They had a hat on which covered their ears. It was cold. They wore gloves and black leather jackets.

«So...» – said one of the two – «drink for anyone?».

"So..." – Vespasiano repeated it in his head – "Drink".

"Here we are. Always the same way. The same manners, slimy manners. The same words. Always identical as ten years ago. Nothing has changed. They are back to finish the job. Sure".

But not all was lost. Vespasiano knew it. He was now thinking.

He had to answer their questions. Sure. But he also knew that they wouldn't have touched him until he had stayed there, at the square. There were no more customers remained at the bar, but Geppi was still inside. And Geppi was a strong and broad-shouldered guy; an old and tough hockey player who surely wouldn't have made them easy.

"What if they wait until Geppi's gone?".

He wondered all of a sudden. It was possible. Sure. That poor fellow of a bartender surely did have to retire home, sooner or later. And he didn't want him to get involved in such a tricky situation which could possibly put his life in danger. No, Geppi had to stay out of it. That problem was his and it was up to him to solve it.

But not all was lost. Even if it was late in the evening, somebody could have seen them there, at the square. And he would have shouted for sure. And they knew that. They couldn't make it against a hundred people who surely would

have rushed out immediately if he had started shouting. Lele would have surely leant out of the window above the “Three Peaks”, pointing the shotgun at those two.

Lele slept just upstairs. And he was a light sleeper. He had always kept his shotgun by the side of his bed since two Romanians, criminals, worker-disguised, sneaked into his house one night and robbed him many years before.

He took comfort from this. And he thought that maybe there was still a way out but, sure, he had to move fast. He had to think.

They had started talking and laid their first cards on the table. And he hadn't liked what they had asked him. “He was one of them – they had told him – and he had to cooperate”.

“...one of them...” – These words kept spinning in his head. “...once you've crossed the line you must cooperate... otherwise someone can get hurt...”.

They had kept repeating in the old, allusively and double meaning ways. But things went differently that time. He had escaped. And he had almost done it. But he hadn't because they had found him once again.

And now they wanted to know all about the engineer.

Vespasiano had always suspected the engineer. And now those two had proved it founded. And they wanted to know anything about his habits. About who went in and out of his house. His lifestyle. Whether he owned another house, another place in which, he reckoned, he could keep the papers. Those papers. Those important ones that he knew damn well.

And they wanted to know anything about the priest, Father Mario.

“Father Mario” – thought Vespasiano flabbergasted. It was him, the priest himself, too. He couldn't believe it.

“Father Mario is involved...”.

He tried to resist. He couldn't betray them. Not this time.

They were not only his companions but his fellow villagers, as well. Friends. People he had known for a lifetime since he was a boy.

He could say nothing and didn't have to. He had to resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. He kept repeating it to himself continually. He clenched his fists and kept on sweating. He was telling some things and tried to gain time. But he had to

resist. But how long? At least till morning, he said to himself. “Don’t give up. Don’t give up”.

Until he broke down. It didn’t take long. And then he told everything. Again.

They had pointed the pen at him. And he had recognized it at once. A deadly weapon, well-known among the people in the business. Just a short click would have been enough to have him electrocuted right there. And he wouldn’t even have had the time to shout. By then, he realized that his struggle was over.

They had won, once again.

“You can’t get out of this” – he had convinced himself. He knew it. He had turned pale. He had to choose whether “live or die”. And he had chosen life. “Am I wrong? No, it’s life that’s wrong” – he replied to himself.

«*E allora Vespasiano? Chi era chi do'i de n sera?*»¹ – «Well, Vespasiano? Who were those two the other night?» – Geppi asked him reopening the bar the next morning.

Vespasiano had stood there, all night. To think.

«Russians. They were Russians. Definitely Russians. From Kgb» – he said that shamelessly.

No one would have trusted him. And he left. He had decided that he wouldn’t have come back again.

When they were arrested, two days after, he saw them on television. On the newscast. It was them. “Finally they’ve caught them” – the journalist declaimed in his report. A Moldavian gang who had burgled a dozen houses within two nights in Comelico. Even the priest’s house had been cleaned out from top to bottom. And the investigators were now chasing the partner in crime. A local someone, it was told.

Vespasiano was excited. He had been so good. Those two had promised him that thanks to that operation, he would eventually have fallen into line. And he was now safe at the secret Kgb base, that he knew very well, was concealed inside an old hospital no longer in use, just there, at a stone’s throw from Comelico. His colleagues of former days had taken him there. The ones from Prague. As agents in disguise. The next morning. After the arrest. They had brought him into a room which Vespasiano considered being the new operative chief’s one.

“Whoever could imagine that the Central Committee was here” – he thought. “A perfect place for the Central

Committee”.

His life had changed again. Now he had his white uniform as well. But the important one with the straitjacket. As a great officer. And he felt like Napoleon. Still, motionless inside his tight, tight uniform. With his hand in his shirt pocket.

“As the Great General” – he repeated himself. Unlike the first time, this time they had promoted him. Straight to the second floor: “Intelligence Division”, sure.

Now all he’s got to do is wait. To obey and wait, he knows, until they assign him another mission which will certainly be of great responsibility. It will happen soon, he knows, he knows.

But in the meantime he smiles. And thinks.

And smiles more. Because nobody knows that he is now working for the Oss².

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Notes

1

This phrase has been reported in the original Ladin language still spoken by the people in Comelico which derives directly from Latin. [T’sN]

2

Office of Strategic Service, ex US secret service. In this case the double meaning is associated with the abbreviation of *Organizzazione socio-sanitaria*. (Social-sanitary organization)

* The characters and incidents portrayed and the names herein are fictitious, and any similarity to the name, character or history of any actual persons living or dead is entirely co-incidental and unintentional.

** Translation by Adriana Tonon

*** Ink drawing by Martina Zandonella.



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