

To be delivered in person by Bob Tankersley

Milan, February 23, 1941

Dear Dad:

I am writing this to be carried by my very dear friend, Bob Tankersley, who hopes to be able to hand it to you in person when he passes through Newark on his way to St. Louis. If you only can talk to Bob for a few minutes, I know you will agree with me that he is one grand fellow, and I certainly hate to see him leave here, although of course in the line of duty I have had to urge him to do so.

Last Monday, just after I had finished writing to you-all, Sarah's letter of December 30th arrived, several days after yours of January 23rd. So it goes. I was very glad to hear more about your Christmas, and to know that you all had a good time. It goes without saying that I would have liked very much to have been there. Less said the better.

During the last few days we have been very busy in the office. The Department has decided to call in all the passports outstanding and replace them by new ones of an entirely different type. Instead of having a red cover, the new ones are green, have more pages, and a few other small differences. The reason for doing this is to make it impossible to use the many stolen and fraudulent passports of the old type which are now in circulation. You have, of course, read in the papers about the activities of Communist circles in obtaining passports under false names and with false documentation. Besides this, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of passports which were "lost" by Americans who went to fight in the Civil War in Spain, and many of these are thought to be still in circulation, with the pictures changed to be an entirely different person. It is hard to check up on this, because persons bearing false passports rarely come into consulates for any purpose at all, and use the passport solely for registering in hotels and perhaps occasionally for crossing frontiers. But generally they avoid showing the passes to anyone who is likely to know enough to be able to detect minor alterations, fake renewals, etc. The local police, in most places, are not sufficiently well trained to be able to detect forgeries, and frequently do not even have the capacity to tell whether or not the passport has expired.

The department has presumably picked this time to change the type because there are fewer Americans abroad now than at any time since the world war and consequently there are fewer passports to be changed. Nevertheless, we have had to send out over 200 notices of the change, and we expect to have to replace about that many passports. When you stop to consider that each passport has to be filled in by hand in India ink, and then be signed and thumbprinted in three different places, you will realize that it is quite a job. It takes our clerk about three quarters of an hour to do one, not counting taking the applications, which are also long and tedious. I have two clerks under me for this purpose, and each of them can do two applications and passports every morning and afternoon; i.e., four a day. So you can see that we have to keep at it pretty hard to get 200 issued by April 10th – the day set by the Department when all the old passports become invalid. All the diplomatic and special passports have to be replaced, too, and I will probably lose mine. I shall make every effort to keep it as a keepsake of my first years in the Service.

Yesterday was the anniversary of my arrival in Milan, and the Consulate was closed for the occasion. (It was also Washington's Birthday.) It was a beautiful day, sort of like the type we call the first day of spring. It was crystal clear, and from the railroad station, where I went to meet a courier, I could see the whole range of mountains to the North of Milan. This is a very rare occurrence, and requires the atmospheric conditions to be just so. In the winter, of course, the mountains – and the plain as well – are shrouded in mist and fog. You are lucky to be able to see half a block away, much less forty to fifty miles. In the summer, on the other hand, you can rarely see the mountains because of the heat waves which rise from the plain between Milan and the mountains. Bob Pallucca, who has been here about five years now, estimates that you can only see the mountains about ten times a year, so you can imagine how thrilled I was. The railroad station is an ideal place to look from because there is a vast yards without buildings (except switchtowers, etc.) which permits an unobstructed view to the north. Since Milan is as flat as a pancake, the buildings shut out the view from the rest of the city, unless you get seven or eight stories up in a building, from whence you can look over the majority of the houses.

We are still lacking official information about the closing of the Consulates in Naples and Palermo. I guess they will stay open until the end of the month, anyway, to wind up their business and prepare to move the archives etc. to some other place – which I assume will be Rome. I hope, as soon as they get things straightened out, to be able to go down to Rome for a few days to talk over the situation. There is a new nationality law now in force which changes quite a lot of things, and, as usual, there are a lot of points which are not entirely clear to me.

Love and best wishes to all,

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