

Another way/ S.F. man starts campaign to save the birds of Assisi

By Alan Cline
Examiner staff writer

Bert Schwarzschild, who is no stranger to local causes and controversy, has embarked on a new battle. His target: the Italian government.

Schwarzschild wants to save the birds of Assisi.

An electrical engineer turned full-time conservationist, Schwarzschild, 57, was touring Europe by rail last fall when he decided to seek the spirit of St. Francis in San Francisco's sister city.

He had seen pictures of his home town's patron saint surrounded by birds and expected to see them on nearby Mt. Subasio as he hiked to the summit.

Instead of nightingales, orioles, doves, wrens and magpies or other members of the 24 species known there, he found nothing but multicolored shotgun shell casings.

"Italian hunters shoot anything that moves," he said here the other day. "In Italy, songbirds are a delicacy."

In an article published in the March issue of the National Audubon Society magazine, Schwarzschild wrote, "The number of spent shells I had passed mounted into the hundreds, and I noticed, from time to time, feathers stuck in the bushes or lying on the ground. . . . Suddenly the enormity of it struck me: Could it be that here on St. Francis' own mountain, all the birds had been hunted out? His beloved birds? How could such a disaster have been allowed?"

On a cold November night, as he slept atop the mountain, he recalls hearing a sound that on later investigation turned out to be a nightingale. It

was the only indication of bird life in the picturesque setting of the ageless Italian village whose cathedral housed frescos of St. Francis and the now-missing birds.

He'd gone there on the advice of a friend who told him to visit the spot where St. Francis preached to the birds.

"It's such a beautiful spot with so many birds and wildflowers," he was told. "Maybe St. Francis' spirit will touch you."

What touched him was the absence of birdlife, a disaster that he viewed as environmental as well as ecumenical.

Schwarzschild, who once waged a long battle with the California State Automobile Association over an environmental issue and worked unceasingly and successfully for a hillside park in San Francisco's Eureka Valley, was determined to find a way to bring back the Assisi birds.

Unable to voice his concerns to the Italian clergy, he eventually located Father Claude Jarmak, a newly arrived American as concerned as he. Father Claude checked and found that the local church had obtained a temporary shooting ban on Mt. Subasio in deference to the celebration of St. Francis' 800th birthday.

"We agreed it would take a longer period of year-round protection over a much wider area to bring the birds back in viable number and diversity," Schwarzschild wrote.

Thus was the seed planted for the Assisi Bird Campaign. The plan was to protect the birds by declaring them a "living monument." The designation would be akin to endangered species status.

Schwarzschild reasoned that since Italy protects its historic monuments and buildings such as Rome's Colosse-

um, why not take a crack at saving the birds?

He figures Italy will act when enough conservationists there join bird lovers elsewhere in pressuring Italian President Sandro Pertini and the mayor of Assisi, Professor Gianfranco Costa, to take the action.

To obtain the letter writers, Schwarzschild, the campaigner, took the most common first step. He scheduled a news conference.

He invited 100 stalwarts from the conservation world, including Prince Philip, honorary chairman of the World Wildlife Fund; David Brower, Friends of the Earth founder and a giant in the American conservation movement; Albert Baez, a former Stanford professor who is chairman of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources' Commission on Education; and A.A.T. Ellis, president of the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society of New Zealand.

Well before his visit to San Francisco last week, Philip sent a personally signed note telling Schwarzschild he

couldn't make the event, but added, "Please don't take this as any sort of discouragement. I fully sympathize with your motives."

Ellis predicted the campaign would "capture the imagination of bird lovers throughout the world."

Brower called the effort an important struggle, noting, "Francis of Assisi recognized the rights of his co-inhabitants of this fragile sphere."

In his own letter to Pertini, Schwarzschild explained his outrage "by this carnage on St. Francis' mountain of the birds he loved and to whom he preached."

He sent the chief executive a copy of his Audubon piece translated into Italian by Marisa Cohen, an Italian living in Montreaux, Switzerland.

Schwarzschild advised that he plans to return to Italy in May for rallies and more press conferences in Assisi. He's already pressing for a meeting that would bring together himself, Cohen and other bird lovers on one side and the Italian president and the mayor of Assisi on the other.

