

Benefit held for the birds: local activists help Assisi



Abert Baez, Bert Schwarzschild and Paul Winter with a statue of St. Francis.

By DAVID SMITH

"Troublemaker" is a name ecological activist Bert Schwarzschild wears like a badge, and his field of battle has ranged from Democratic state convention floors to the California coastline.

But when Schwarzschild traveled to Europe in 1982, all he was looking for was a vacation. Instead, he found a cause.

"I asked a friend if she would name just one place in Europe that I should visit," Schwarzschild said. "She said, 'You must go to Assisi and you must climb the mountain of St. Francis and you must see the beautiful birds and the wild flowers, and possibly the spirit of St. Francis will touch you.'"

"It was a beautiful day when I did finally climb the mountain — a beautiful day for birds," Schwarzschild said. "Yet all I saw along the trails were the remains of shotgun shells littering the ground and all I could hear were the distant blasts of shotguns. I didn't see one bird the entire day."

Shocked by what he saw, Schwarzschild said, he immediately started The Assisi Bird Campaign, calling for a hunting moratorium on the mountain to save the remaining birds.

As part of his effort, Schwarzschild wrote an article for Audobon magazine called "No Birds Sing on St. Francis Mountain."

According to Scharzschild, 1.5 million hunters bring down over 200 million Italian songbirds each year.

The article started a barrage of letters to the Italian government from concerned readers. The mayor of Assisi claimed he was receiving letters "by the cartload" every day, according to Schwarzschild.

Since then, he said, Schwarzschild's campaign has mustered the support of San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein and England's Prince Phillip.

Tonight, Schwarzschild will join forces with folk singer-composer-writer Earl Robinson in a concert at Berkeley's UC Theatre to benefit The Assisi Bird Campaign.

Feinstein is scheduled to speak at the event, along with Berkeley Mayor Gus Newport and activist Dr. Albert Baez. The benefit will also include a screening of "Brother Sun, Sister Moon," Franco Zefferelli's film chronicle of St. Francis' life.

Benefits from Thursday's concert will go towards matching the Italian government's funding of a wildlife preserve, as well as to the creation of a bioethics center and nature reserve on St. Francis Mountain, Schwarzschild said.

Claiming the "intervention and spirit of St. Francis," Schwarzschild said he feels he has been blessed by the saint's divine assistance since the campaign began four years ago.

"When we held the first Assisi Bird Festival in 1983, the Italians had just elected a new Socialist ministry. As part of the changeover, a new position of minister of environment was created," Schwarzschild said.

"His first major policy was to protect the birds of Assisi. He also decided to come to our event, which really pulled in the national coverage. This is what I call the divine intervention of St. Francis."

Shortly afterwards, he said, the Italian government called a moratorium on hunting in Assisi. Since then, the Italians have been working with Schwarzschild's group to create a wildlife preserve on the mountain.

No stranger to environmental politics, Schwarzschild said he decided to devote his life to good causes after he and his family fled from Nazi Germany in 1936.

Schwarzschild said he was encouraged by the success of the Assisi bird campaign.

"If we succeed in protecting the songbirds in far-off Assisi — birthplace of the saint of ecology and protector of all disenfranchised species — then there is hope for us all," he said.