

Journey of an Eco-wanderer

— by Bert Schwarzschild

"The journey is more important than the destination" has been my favorite axiom for years. It has served me well since I took its message to heart, whether I walked to the grocery store, bicycled across the island of Bali, or hiked up the mountain path to the summit of St. Francis' mountain, Mt. Subasio in Assisi, Italy. In each case I've had a positive, fulfilling adventure, because during the journey I have remained open to interact with strange and wonderful living beings, be they the animal, human, vegetable or mineral variety.

This interactive wandering has led me into several eco-activities which culminated, sometimes after years of sweat and blood, in making a positive difference in my and the Earth's health. By embracing the opportunities to make a difference that lay along the way, I transformed some part of myself, many others, and the living Earth. I want to share with you one such eco-action which occurred as a result of my wandering. It was a profound experience.

I visited Assisi, Italy, St. Francis' birthplace, at the behest of a fellow conservationist, Marisa Cohen, who thought I would be inspired by the city's songbirds, which St. Francis made famous 800 years earlier. I followed her instructions. However, when I walked up the tree-lined mountain trail that I imagined Francis of Assisi also walked and frolicked on centuries ago, I discovered the path underfoot was lined with hundreds of shotgun casings. No birds were to be seen or heard; only occasional feathers caught in the branches testified to their former presence. I realized with anger and outrage that I had come 6000 miles to discover the decimation of St. Francis' beloved songbirds on his mountain by hunters!



When I returned to the USA, I launched an international campaign to bring back St. Francis' songbirds to Assisi. First I wrote an exposé of this tragedy and persuaded *Audubon* Magazine to publish it. I credit the intervention of the spirit of Francis for arranging to have the Editor agree to see me without prior appointment, to read my first draft and to accept the story on the spot, an unheard-of action. In contrast, the environmental reporter of the San Francisco *Examiner* who later interviewed me, expressed consternation and jealousy over my success in getting this story published in *Audubon*. "I've submitted stories to them for seven years without success," he protested. "Who did you know to get your foot in the door?" My answer, that St. Francis intervened, didn't seem to make him feel any better or encourage him on his chances for future publishing success.

The campaign I started and initially publicized in *Audubon* spread worldwide. Ultimately, the Assisi Bird Campaign (ABC) created a national controversy in Italy. It became the subject of national debate, and a rallying point for the heretofore discouraged Italian conservation movement. The resulting media stories, debates, editorials, meetings, convocations and public pressure led first to a ban on hunting in Assisi, followed by government approvals of the boundaries for a permanent nature reserve on Mt. Subasio.



This "ecolo-menical" (ecological plus ecumenical) victory seemed small, considering that 1.5 million Italian hunters kill an estimated 200 million songbirds a year, most of whom are migrating on their way to the Mediterranean Sea breeding areas. In reality, our success was significant out of proportion because Assisi has become known as a center for peace and reconciliation, symbolizing peace on Earth and with the Earth. The message the Assisi Bird Campaign conveys is, "If it can happen in Assisi, it can happen elsewhere and everywhere." And it is already happening! Item: Recently, the *Christian Science Monitor* (Nov. 3, 1989) reported in a story titled 'Bringing the Birds Back to Assisi', "... that barbaric annual 'Bird Fair' which hunters sponsored annually in Florence, Italy, to promote songbird hunting was recently outlawed." "Hunting in general and the hunting of songbirds in particular, is under fire in Italy," the article concluded.

Another outgrowth of the Assisi Bird Campaign is the establishment of the Assisi Nature Council/Europe (ANC/EUR) and its USA affiliate, the Assisi Nature Council/USA (ANC/USA), both of which I co-founded with Marisa Cohen and other conservationists. ANC/USA and ANC/EUR support the establishment of the nature reserve on Mt. Subasio and the funding of the Assisi International Nature Education and Ethics Center. ANC/USA's additional objective is to encourage and inspire individuals to develop and foster a respect and affection for nature.

The organization's newsletter, "Assisi Connection," publishes many examples of individual environmental initiatives by others to encourage and assist readers to find their own best suited personal action. I believe that individual environmental initiative can make a significant positive difference in the restoration of the Earth. You too can make a difference! Further information is available from ANC/USA, 313 Goodhill Road, Kentfield CA 94904.

That's what can happen when you wander along a distant mountain path, and when you believe that the journey is more important than the destination and that your personal action can make a difference. ♦