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"They were putting up the statue of Saint Francis in front of the church in a little side street just off the Avenue where no birds sang and the sun was coming up on time in its usual fashion and just beginning to shine on the statue of Saint Francis where no birds sang..."

From "A Coney Island of the Mind," by Lawrence Ferlinghetti

By Deborah Straw  
Staff Reporter

## Birdman With High Ideals



BURLINGTON—Based on the firm belief that one person can make a difference, conservationist Bert Schwarzschild saved Mount Subasio for the songbirds of Assisi.

Schwarzschild was in Burlington October 18 for a Burlington College-sponsored conference, "Common Ground, Ecology, Culture and Imagination."

In 1982, Schwarzschild resigned his position as executive director of American Youth Hostel's San Francisco office and decided to travel around Europe. A friend recommended that he visit Assisi's Mount Subasio, where St. Francis had preached to the birds.

When he reached the mountain, he discovered that St. Francis' birds had been decimated by local hunters. Later, he learned that there are 1½ million Italian hunters who slaughter more than 200 million small, wild birds annually. Most of these are migratory songbirds; Mount Subasio is one stopover point.

Schwarzschild, a sensitive, soft-spoken man, couldn't forget the tragedy he had encountered in Assisi. He took it upon himself to single-handedly enlist others' help in making Mount Subasio a "sacred" place, safe to songbirds once again. He wrote articles, enlisted help in both Italy and the United States and brought pressure upon Italian, American and Vatican officials. He wrote the pope and received no response, but the Italian press covered his efforts closely.

One article, which he wrote for *Audubon* magazine, particularly gained much international attention. This was the start and catalyst of the "Assisi Bird Campaign" which culminated in a special dedication day at the mountain.

On Sept. 17, 1983, Assisi Bird Day, Schwarzschild and his followers led a procession up the mountain and released a few symbolic birds. "We left it up to the Italian Bird League, and finally concentrated on 12 hawks. We felt they had a better chance and better nesting habits," he recalled.

The park was dedicated as a permanent wildlife sanctuary.

At many moments during his efforts, Schwarzschild felt in communion with the spirit of St. Francis. He selected the birds' release site, feeling he was being guided by St. Francis. Then on his way up the mountain, it started raining. "I went on and got totally drenched. I again felt St. Francis. When the rain comes to animals and people who don't

wear camera bags and suits, it feels very good."

The Subasio Regional Park will be a national reserve covering the crown and side of the mountain. At the site will be a nature center for school children, with a focus on environmental ethics and education.

The birds—about 24 species including doves, hawks, magpies and swallows—will return if hunters no longer pursue them there, he said. "Birds are extremely sensitive to hunting habits. If the mountain is protected, they will come back."

The park has gone through the planning stages, boundaries have been established and a resolution has been passed. Next, it must face a provincial vote as one of a series of parks.

Schwarzschild spent a year working on the Assisi Bird Campaign, mostly from the West Coast. He received no pay, living instead on savings, borrowed money, some unemployment checks and with money earned by managing an apartment building. During that time, he also became the national director of The Whale Center, which protects whales.

He also recently spent three months in Australia, Bali and the Fiji Islands. While there, he studied a community of dolphins which has developed an ongoing relationship with some native Australians.

He is now an honorary member and the founder of the Assisi Nature Council Council, and founder of the Assisi Nature Council/U.S.A. His work is not done on behalf of St. Francis' birds.

While in Burlington, he organized a crew of 12 people to clean up the grounds behind Battery Park. Spending an hour Oct. 19, they were able to pick up years of accumulated trash.

Schwarzschild, a Jew, was born in Germany; his family fled that country in 1936, "just in time." From that experience, he developed a strong sense of righting injustice.

Why does he believe it is necessary to

preserve the land for birds, and the seas for dolphins and whales?

"Unless the species [man] learns to become part of the circle of life rather than a part from it, we will not be able to live with each other and survive. We can learn a lot from dolphins and birds. For instance, dolphins and whales are familial and they have mastered their anger," he said. "Until we can learn to conciliate with other species, we will

have a hard time conciliating with each other."

In his speech held in City Hall, he said, "I hope that the Assisi park and nature center will become models which will spread around the world, so that interspecies conciliation and reverence for nature will become the rule rather than the exception."

"If there are enough of us, we can transform the world!"

"St. Francis preaching to the birds" (from an African tapestry) is a four color poster created to promote the Assisi Bird Campaign.

