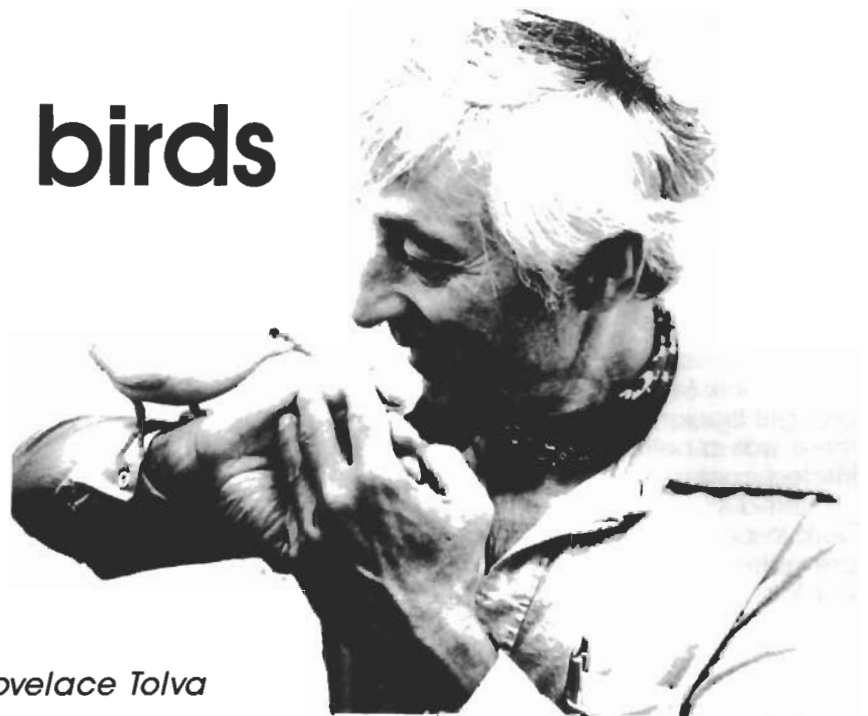


Where no birds sang



Mt. Subasio, where 800 years ago Francis of Assisi preached to the birds, is birdless due to thoughtless and excessive hunting. With help from some friends activist/environmentalist Bert Schwartzschild is changing that.

Marcia Lovelace Tolva

Bert Schwartzschild's power is paradoxical. It is a gentle power, a quiet strength. The face beneath his silver hair has been molded by a lifetime of laughter and recycled pain. The sparkle in his warm eyes has a mischievous edge. There's an air of laid-back chaos around him as he calmly juggles all 37 irons in his current fire. Onlookers will probably just shake their heads, but Bert knows how to get things done.

This engineer-turned-environmentalist has successfully fought city hall for neighborhood parks, created a chain of hostels along the West Coast for American Youth Hostels, and was recently national director of Whale Center, a conservation organization working on behalf of whales and the oceans. In his spare time, as founder and U.S. chairperson of the Assisi Bird Campaign, he has waged a successful two-year battle to save the birds of St. Francis.

It started in 1982. While on a European vacation Bert visited Assisi at the urging of a friend who told him, "You must promise to climb Mt. Subasio where St. Francis preached to the birds. It's such a beautiful spot with so many birds and wildflowers. Maybe St. Francis' spirit will touch you."

Only after his arrival did Bert realize that he was hiking up Mt. Subasio within a few days of St. Francis' 800th birthday. He noticed immediately how ideal the landscape, with its trees, shrubs and wildflowers, was for the birds and other small creatures St. Francis loved.

But as he hiked he was often startled by shotgun blasts coming from the valley below. He began to notice shotgun shells littering the path. Their numbers increased as he climbed. He also began to see feathers on the ground and in the bushes. Then he realized that he had not heard nor seen a single bird. Horrified, he realized that the birds of St. Francis had been hunted out.

It was cold that night as Bert camped near the summit of Mt. Subasio and sleep did not come to still his "contemplative rage." Sometime in the hours of darkness he heard a rustling in a nearby bush and then the beautiful song of a nightingale. It was the only bird he would hear on the mountain. At that moment he decided that the perfect gift to honor St. Francis' 800th birthday would be to bring back the birds to his mountain.

Upon his return to the United States, Bert wrote an article asking people to send letters to Italian authorities. The article was printed in *Audubon* magazine. (Bert didn't know that you don't just walk into a magazine office and ask to see the editor about printing your story. So he did, and they did). The Assisi Bird Campaign was born. The letters supporting his proposal arrived "by the carload" in the offices of Italian authorities. "If Italy can provide public protection for its many historic and religious buildings and monuments," he reasoned, "why not provide the same protection for St. Francis' birds? Make Mt. Subasio's

birds a living monument to the memory of Italy's most beloved and well-known saint."

A year later, with much help from the spirit of St. Francis, who apparently enjoys opening impossible doors through uncanny coincidences, Bert in the United States and Marissa Cohen in Switzerland (the friend who urged Bert to visit Assisi in the first place) brought artists, journalists, church leaders and politicians to Assisi. Lawrence Ferlinghetti was moved by the coincidental connection between the campaign and his poem about the statue of Francis in San Francisco with its refrain "where no bird sang." Musician Paul Winter agreed to come because he had just dedicated his latest album to the "patron saint of ecology."

The Italian government, which had previously remained neutral on the issue in deference to a powerful hunting lobby, sent the new minister of the environment. His presence brought television crews to cover the procession up Mt. Subasio to release native birds. In a nation where hunters annually slay some 200 million birds, mostly migrating songbirds, the public began to respond to what Bert calls "this ecolo-menical disaster."

On October 8, 1984, the Subasio Nature Council was born to help administer the soon-to-be-established Subasio Regional Park. The first step now realized, Bert and Marissa turned to the second half of their dream, the creation of an international ecology center in Assisi. They are now engaged in fundraising to that end.

What can one person do? Bert Schwartzschild answers with his life, and the answer is "plenty." He has, like poet Kenji Miyazawa, embraced pain and burned it as a fuel for his journey. A German Jew, Bert fled Europe with his family "just in time." It was 1936. The system of extermination camps was not yet in place, but people were being arrested, Jewish businesses were being boycotted, German children were enrolled in eugenics classes and swearing allegiance to Hitler. Bert remembers being beaten by former friends, ostracized (it was too dangerous for former friends to be seen with him) and finally being forced

to leave school. His most vivid memory is of storm troopers goose-stepping past his house in the middle of the night singing "When the Jewish blood spurts from the knife, we will all be free." He sums it up simply, "I was a scared kid."

His own sense of persecution set him on what he calls "the path of the troublemaker," questioning, fighting for underdogs and underdog causes. While in engineering school, he helped publish an underground paper criticizing "the conservative, heartless, depersonalized way the faculty dealt with the students." Enrolling the aid of friends from other schools to distribute it, the co-conspirators never got caught. But they did cause a stir. Today, of his work for endangered animals, he says, "They are victims of persecution too, like other cultures or nations being persecuted."

Bert's idealism is made more effective by large doses of practicality, flexibility, optimism and humor. He did not hesitate to appeal to the pocketbooks of Assisi's citizenry by pointing out how good the wildlife refuge and ecology center will be for tourism. Whenever he is tempted to rigidity, he reminds himself that the young lawyer who helped him fight the bureaucracy for neighborhood parks was named Cap Weinberger, while a liberal Democrat "sold us down the river." And while regretting that it happened, Bert trusts the universe to bring something positive even out of the election of 1984.

Meister Eckhart teaches the necessity of letting go, of emptying ourselves of what we have been, or known, or done in order to channel what is birthing itself through us here and now. Bert calls that, "being an opportunist," always open to unexpected chances to advance a cause. "Every person contains so much potential," Bert says. "If you manage to dance through the day, you can get so much done." ♦

Poster orders (\$5.00) and tax deductible contributions may be sent to the Assisi Bird Campaign c/o Bert Schwartzschild, 2311 Webster St., Berkeley, California 94705.

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

