



Miracle at St. Anna

The book !

The movie!

The facts! (as I know them)

Read all about it!

The Book

"L'uomo morto", or in Barga, "l'omo morto". (The dead man)- Regardless of the dialect, on Nov. 10/11 he will wake up at sunset for only a couple of minutes. The sun will pause for him long enough to look down the Serchio valley to see if his loved one is there.

He will do it again on Jan. 30/31 and then close his eyes for another year.

The phenomenon of the sun rising, disappearing and then rising again happens only for the people of beautiful Garfagnana - for no one else in the world.

The great haunted mountain, shaped like a man lying down, guards the Serchio Valley. Wherever you are in Garfagnana you cannot escape its presence. In his book, James McBride, the author of *Miracle at St. Anna* explains to the readers:



"He is easy to see from any point in Barga and the surrounding Tuscan villages of the Serchio Valley. Even during the day, he is a frightening sight. He is huge. He lies on his back, his jaw extending with fury, his forehead huge and dense, with a crop of hair cut in Marine style jutting fiercely skyward.

His angry, thick skull is topped by a colossal eyebrow furrowed in rage; his monstrous chest protrudes with mutinous strength, his steel-like legs bent at the knees knife skyward. Once you see him, you cannot escape him."



The myth says that he lies there to stop his loved one from running to the sea and freedom. But I don't believe it. I think he lies there to guard our Valley from strangers trekking from the sea and change the Garfagnana region to just another beautiful place for tourists.

"L'Omo Morto", (translated by McBride as the "sleeping man") is also the guardian of our ancestors' lore and of the unseen inhabitants in the chestnut forests in the valley; for those without Tuscan imagination, these inhabitants can be seen carved in sculptures on the façade of the immense gothic cathedrals.

In his book McBride tries to bring back to life those monsters, best left alone, only to be remembered in the tales of our grand-parents, whispered in our ears during raining, restless nights:



" !!..... The Negro skeletons only added to the haunted legacy of mountains already full of five centuries of lore about wolves, witches, half-men and half-goats, child-gobbling goblins, woman snatching moon monsters, angry cave fairies, toads that bit you and drained your life-blood, sleepwalking witches..... and other creatures whose victims where found in the mountain's muddy ridges; children who simply disappeared forever.....! "

He set his fictional story on the feet of mountain peaks bordering both sides of the Serchio river; mountains with names like: The Horse Mountain, the Table of the Thirsty Wizard, the Kingdom of Echo, the Laughing Witch Who Came Back, the Hill that Swallowed a City and our guardian friend, L'Omo Morto. (The dead man). The names of these mountains are part of the folklore of the valley. James McIntire describes the history of the valley by following the chronological development of a typical village, which could easily be our Barga; narrated with a sense of irreverence toward the past, the blurb is worth reading. Below are a few lines from his book:



"It was founded by monks from nearby La Spezia, who were lured by the area's black cypresses, natural olive groves and thriving chestnut trees. The monks lived peacefully for nearly fifty years until the Lucchesians arrived conquering the town in 1202 with horses and spears. They, in turn, were driven out by the Pisans, who arrived forty-five years later with bigger horses and spears, and with mules. The Pisans stuck around for forty years and built a small wall around the town to keep invaders out, but the wall failed them when they were attacked in 1347 by the Ligurians, who arrived

with ladders, scaled the wall, drove the Pisans out and lived happily ever after, thinking they had conquered nearby Florence, until the Florentine arrived and sent them packing. The Florentine stayed for 148 years, extending the wall around the town a foot higher with mortar and embedding broken bottles along its top, which only served to make the Lucchesians angry when they showed up again, looking for a rematch with the Pisans. They found the Florentine instead and whipped them just for being so frivolous as to waste good wine bottles by sticking them in a wall, then cooled their heels happily for 26 years waiting for the Pisans to mount a come back. They were not disappointed. The Pisans arrived in 1598 and knocked the stuffing out of them, leaving only teeth, bones and skulls of the survivors and sending the rest over the glass topped wall by the dozen. The Lucchesians responded by laying low in the hills outside town for 140 years, telling stories to their children about the wicked Pisans who had left only teeth, bones and skulls of the great Lucchesians people, conveniently omitting the part about the time they took Pisan teeth, bones and skulls as souvenirs.. Meanwhile the Florentines, who were feeling flush in those days from having beaten the stuffing out of the Pisans three times straight in the adjoining valley, rushed in and sent the Pisans to the dogs. A bandit warrior named Enrico the Terrible wandered by with his army, whipped the Florentines with one hand tied behind his back, then departed and forgot

about the town completely. The Lucchesians returned for one last throw, only to find that everyone had grown tired of fighting and had now graduated to diplomacy, which was worse.

The four groups, Lucchesians, Ligurians, Pisans and Florentines , settled in the valley around the town's walls and argued for eighty seven years about who owned what and where, until Napoleon arrived in 1799 and beat the blubber out of everybody. The town sat, indifferent for 122 years until 1921 when a blacksmith named Bruno Bernacchi (name changed by author) from the village of Barga, near the Serchio River, showed up and rebuilt the town from scratch. He renamed it for himself, at which point Benito Mussolini's fascists shot him in the foot in 1939 and sent him packing on his pony, declaring it a fascist town. In short the town had known pain, glory, suffering, pity, self sacrifice, grief, jealousy, murder, mayhem, peace, war, grapes, wine and wisdom.

The film



Presently in Italy and particularly in Barga there is much discussion about the film "Miracle at St. Anna", based on the book written by James McBride and directed by Spike Lee. Spike Lee was in Barga at the launching of the film, in my opinion, to try and defuse the criticism.

The movie, almost incidentally, portrays a part of the Garfagna history which few Tuscans are able to discuss without pain and a feeling that some type of revenge is due to them. Spike Lee is kept busy explaining that the film, like the book, is a work of fiction. Its main purpose is to recount the fictional story of four men of the 92nd Infantry Division, the "American Buffalo Soldiers". Despite the similarities in names, location and facts, the movie-viewers familiar with the recent history of the area are asked to forget what really happened there August 12, 1944 in Sant'Anna di Spazzema or Dec. 26, 1944 in Barga, Sommocolonia and nearby villages. The film script is a much stripped-down version of the book; it has great war shots and a simple plot. Despite the title, it doesn't even attempt to set the movie in the Garfagnana region. Any reference to truth is almost

coincidental. Spike Lee made no attempt to use the glorious scenery in which the story evolves; it could have been shot in a card-board set of a village street in Hollywood.

As you read above (see "the book") McBride attempted to give a sense of location and history with his writing; Spike Lee didn't with the movie. I enjoyed the Tuscan cadence by the partisans. I suppose the movie is OK if seen as a Hollywood production, but I can see why the Italians dislike it; Spike should have stayed away from the subject, including the title, if he did not understand the pain that even the name would bring to the people of the Garfagnana and indeed of all of Italy by resuscitating the recollection of that day in August (12), 1944.

The facts (as I know them)

PIPPPO

The book and movie portray a partisan leader called "Peppi", and he is a major component of the plot. In real life there was a "Pippo", head of the partisan brigades of the North. His real name was MANRICO DUCCESCHI and he was the most wanted man in Italy by the Germans. He and his family came from Pistoia, a town near Barga, where he grew up. He controlled the Garfagnana so thoroughly that the Germans were unable to break through to the sea. Eventually he was responsible for the defence of an area over 40 km in length. His "front" faced the German Gothic line and was part of the spearhead that broke through the German-Gothic line to Modena and later Milan. He was decorated by the US Army for valour and his battalions were officially made part of the US Army.



Around Dec. 24, 1944 he discovered that the German army had planned an attack on the 92nd American Infantry Division then stationed in Galliciano-Barga and surrounding area. He immediately advised the Americans, which moved to a stronger location, but due to their communication problems they did not advise of the imminent attack the troops stationed in Sommocolonia and left them exposed to the German attack of Dec. 26, 1944. The troops

left in Soomocolonia fought valiantly. The Partisans under Pippo fought a rear guard action and once the germans were lured into the forest, they imposed such heavy losses that the germans had to retreat.



At the end of the war Italy was left divided between two main political parties; the Communists controlled by Russia and the Demo-Christians controlled by the USA. "Pippo" was a commodity wanted by both parties. He had declared himself politically neutral. In 1948 he went to a meeting in Rome and when he returned he was "suicided" (*a term I made up*). After his death, the political party in power for many

years, tried to forget this great Italian, and the massacre in Sant'Anna, possibly not to upset the germans that at the time were stopping the Russians from taking over Europe (part of the cold war). A "Ceppo" (small stone marker) is located in Sommoclonia next to lieutenant's Fox, decorated hero of the Buffalo troops.

Last August Barga's mayor, Dr. Sereni laid a wreath on the marker and wrote to the federal government in Rome requesting that "Pippo" be given the gold -medal. We are waiting.

Sant'Anna di Stazzema

Sant'Anna is a very small village in the Appenini Apuani, across the Serchio River from Barga. It is about 20 miles from Barga, as the crow flies, but much further by car. One gets there from Galliciano, where Barga's RR Station is located; it is also on the way to the Grotta del Vento or even



better to the Eremo di Colomini restaurant, where Sara & Davide have trained the trout from the Serchio river to jump directly on your plate so you can eat them fresh (*sometime I overstate!*).

On AUGUST 12, 1944,

as part of a "cleansing operation" the SS unit of the 16th Panzer Fuehrer Division, led by SS leader WALTER REDER, invaded the Stazzema region and machine gunned to death

560 women and children.

The village has only a dozen homes and few inhabitants, but at that time was swollen by refugee families from the nearby sea-shore. No men were in town. The youngest child was 3 months old and the oldest woman was 86 years old. Afterward the SS piled up the church benches on the bodies and burned them with flamethrowers. During the "military" operation, they stopped for lunch. Now Sant'Anna is a sanctuary. Of the 560 people partly cremated, only of 350 (+/-) could be reassembled for burial.

Perhaps Spike Lee could have found another subject for his movie. Perhaps with the horror of St. Anna he could have introduced a bit of the heart of Garfagnana, like James McBride tried to. But he didn't. Like he said, the movie is meant to be only fiction.....



...there was no miracle in Sant'Anna in August 12, 1944.... Lelio