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Virginio B. Sala

A Forest Is Born

The Tale of the Bosco del Molino

TARKA

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Creiamo un Bosco - 2024
by Virginio B. Sala

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To Gabriella, Marianna and Monica

I had a brother who told wonderful lies.
For example, that at night the trees untangled their roots
from the earth and wandered around, but before dawn they
would return to their seat, in perfect tree posture, and no one
would notice. I never went down to check. Only, the night
became very eventful and was accompanied by large woody
beings stretching their roots, without a word.
- Chandra Candiani, *Questo immenso non sapere*

The survival of a city does not depend
on the righteousness of the men who reside there,
but on the woods and marshes that surround it.
- Henry David Thoreau

But, ere we stir the yet unbroken ground,
The various course of seasons must be found;
The weather, and the setting of the winds,
The culture suiting to the several kinds
Of seeds and plants, and what will thrive and rise,
And what the genius of the soil denies.
Virgil, *The Georgics*, I, 50.

Preface

In the peaceful and charming setting surrounding the Agugiaro & Figna mill in Collecchio, an extraordinary project has come to life, simple in its conception but far-reaching in its consequences. This book tells its story.

The story of the “Mill Woods”, first a dream and then a flourishing reality: here, 18,000 trees now bear witness to the power of the community, its collective dedication and commitment to environmental conservation.

Reflecting on my personal experience, suspended hundreds of meters above the ground on the ancient redwood Luna, I feel a strong connection with the universal and urgent need to protect and regenerate our planet. Planting these trees next to the mill is not just a gesture of environmental restoration; it is a profound affirmation of hope and resilience. This 32-acre forest is rich in biodiversity and brings life not only to the landscape, but also to the hearts of those who walk its paths and meadows.

Through the pages of this book, you will travel through wide expanses of oak and poplar trees, places dedicated to community gatherings and ecological education. This forest represents much more than just an isolated refuge; it is a lively corridor that connects the cultural heritage of Parma to the sublime beauty of the Emilian plains, extending even further.

Like the Moon, the “Bosco del Molino” stands as a beacon of possibility. It demonstrates how environmental stewardship can inte-

grate with economic necessity, as well as respect for cultural and historical heritage.

This story is an invitation for each of us to recognize our role as stewards of this magnificent planet, and how deeply interconnected we are with it. It urges us to commit, to plant, to care and to protect. As you browse through these pages, I hope you will be inspired to find ways to contribute, fostering growth and beauty in your corner of the world, just as the “Bosco del Molino” does in its lush and verdant expanses.

This book is not only an account of what has been achieved in Collecchio, but also an inspiration for what can still be accomplished when we dare to dream and act for the good of our Earth, of which we are a sacred part.

*In the service of Love in Action,
julia butterfly hill*

Introduction

It all begins here... Every morning, from six to a quarter to seven, one of the channels of the Italian public radio, Rai Radio 3, airs a program, entitled “*Qui comincia*” (“It all begins here”), that keeps company to listeners who are preparing breakfast or are on their way to work. “Stories, music, images, ideas and tales”, reads the program’s claim. Well, a few hundred episodes ago, during the pandemic, Marco Benedetti’s passion for the desert (a lifetime spent in environmental research projects between the Venice Lagoon and the most remote ecosystems in Asia, Latin America and North Africa), meant that the presentation of one of our books by Pierre Loti, *Il Deserto (The Desert)*, led Benedetti to jot down the name of our publishing house, Tarka, on a paper bag in the kitchen of his house in Calle Varisco, Venice. Loti’s journey through the immensity of the desert sands was the one he embarked on through the Sinai, from the Oasis of Moses towards Jerusalem, at the end of February 1894 and finished a month later in Gaza, his days spent slowly and meticulously, but above all in peace.

Who knows if they can inspire those who now live in those territories...

But they certainly inspired the radio listener who called me the next day at my office in Mulazzo, in Lunigiana.

We were totally unknown to each other, and I could never have guessed how much his phone calls would have the power to trigger reactions and relationships, and then to act as glue and stimu-

lus to keeping them alive. We discussed books and deserts, which Marco Benedetti knows well from work assignments and evenings sipping mint tea in the Eastern Sahara between Tarfaya and Cape Juby. It was in this region, incidentally, that Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, served as director of a small postal airport in 1927.

But yet another book about the desert, albeit full of emotion, color and feeling, would have been risky for a small publishing house like ours, so I asked him: “Apart from deserts, what else interests you?” And, fast and furious, he began to tell me about a woodland creation project that had just started in Italy, near the Parma hills, the Bosco del Molino in Collecchio, a new lowland forest ecosystem.

I knew nothing about it: in these times of viruses and wars, fires and floods, political uncertainty and climate change, it was a piece of news that had escaped entirely unnoticed.

A private company decides to plant a forest on its previously cultivated farmland. So what? One’s first reaction is always a bit sceptical. Planting a few seedlings, even a lot of them, can be a façade: you show you are “green”, you’ve done your duty and you can rest easy. Then, maybe, nobody gives a thought about those poor seedlings anymore, once the moment of initial enthusiasm and the ribbon-cutting are over, and they grow stunted, or they come to a bad end. But no, it seems that in this case it’s not like that. The company in question, Agugiaro & Figna Molini SpA, is an agri-food company, which has a milling plant in Collecchio and produces various types of high-quality flour, both for end-users such as restaurants and pizzerias, and processing companies (not far from Collecchio is the headquarters of one of the most well-known brands of pasta and bakery products on the market, and not only in Italy). Although the initial idea was to compensate for the mill’s carbon emissions directly on site (instead of resorting to credits purchased who knows where), it was later consolidated and extended and embraced the additional aim of serving the com-

munity. Indeed, the company decided to get serious: in order to develop a serious, scientifically-based project and follow it through over time, without the slightest hesitation or approximation, they sought out collaboration with CINSA, the National Inter-University Consortium for Environmental Sciences, for which Marco Benedetti works as Biodiversity Manager; it is made up of 11 member universities, has its headquarters at the University of Ca' Foscari in Venice, and is under the direction of Nelson Marmioli of the University of Parma.

The owners had invested significant effort into the project and planned to expand it to additional sites. And then... Well, that was enough to arouse my curiosity. It really seemed to be one of those “good practices” that can be a fruitful example, capable of generating not only interest but emulation. Did I want to know more? Of course I did. Would I like to go and see it for myself in Collecchio (at that time they were just completing the planting of the seedlings)? Of course, I would! I have always been fascinated by the initial stages of projects, in all fields, and this was an opportunity that promised to be really interesting.

So off I went to Collecchio, to see for myself. And from there on in, talking with Rosanna Figna, who was the driving force behind the forest and now constantly monitors its growth, protecting it from climatic and man-made adversities (read: waste), the idea of writing this book emerged: to tell the story of “how a forest is born”, through talking with the people who, in various capacities, had contributed to starting this initiative: from the general project to the pedological analysis of the soil, and then on to planting the trees. I learned many things along the way and met generous people who are very passionate about their work (something that, nowadays, is not at all a given). They also suggested some unexpected diversions (such as the one about landscape painting, which appears in the Appendix).

Acknowledgements

First of all, my thanks go to Marco Benedetti: without his initial phone-call I might never have heard of the Bosco del Molino and wouldn't have been interested in it. Thanks also for his support during the preparation phase and for our conversations, which were always interesting.

To Rosanna Figna, the “soul” of the forest, for her welcome, the visits, her generous availability and ideas, her passion and enthusiasm. My thanks also go to all the other people at Agugiario & Figna for their courtesy and availability, from the president, Alberto Figna, to the CEO, Riccardo Agugiario, and to Giorgio Agugiario, for all the time they dedicated to me.

To Roberto Comolli, Lisa Di Marco and Giovanni Sanesi, the three “technicians” of the forest, who very generously dedicated a great deal of time to telling me about and explaining the various stages of the project.

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I. The Main Characters

The first person I meet is Rosanna Figna, in her office, which is a small house just outside the office building and next to the Agugiario & Figna mill in Collecchio. On the walls you can immediately glimpse projects, plans and various perspectives of the forest; on her desk, prominently displayed, is *The Girl in the Tree*, a book by Julia “Butterfly” Hill (for those who don’t remember her: she is the American environmentalist who, between 1997 and 1999, lived for 738 days on a thousand-year-old redwood tree in California, to prevent it from being cut down by a large timber company engaged in deforestation in Humboldt County). “She’s my idol,” says Rosanna. Then she tells us: “This was a tool-shed, then it was restored and adapted, but in a way it has reverted to its former use, because it’s here that I keep my shovels, pruning-shears, ice-axes, loppers, everything I need in the forest”.

For Rosanna Figna the woodland project is a dream come true: she has a degree in agriculture, and her thesis was about the design of a park in Parma (“Of course”, she retorts, “the municipality of Parma didn’t even consider the project”) and now, many years later, the creation of a woodland is like coming full-circle. “My love – she says – my passion for trees and nature in general are inherent to my nature. Some time ago I organised some events called ‘100 women for 100 plants’ and I have always dedicated myself to the care and multiplication of plants. It’s as if my family-tree were a real tree... if you’ll pardon the pun!”.

On the wall is a placard: “We must protect trees because they have been doing it for millions of years”. A principle that we have too often forgotten (and still forget). “Trees transform everything they touch into life, turning matter, air, sunlight into what for the rest of living creatures will become the space to inhabit the planet. The world is first and foremost what plant life has been able to make of it. If we think about it, not only do an infinite number of objects and tools that we use derive from plants – food, furniture, clothing, fuel, medicines – but, more importantly, all higher animal life exists thanks to the gaseous exchange of these beings. Plants are the breath of the world. For thousands of years, we have taken everything from Mother Nature: all kinds of minerals from the subsoil, food and timber from the soil, fish from the water and game from the air. Now it’s time to give back and make sure that complete ecosystems are formed again”.

The decision to convert the land adjacent to the Collecchio Mill into woodland was made by the company with the clear aim of off-setting the CO₂ emitted by the plant: this was one of the reasons (not the only one, as we shall see) that convinced the company’s board of directors, one which was already very attentive to ecological and health-related issues (from the choice of electricity supply derived exclusively from renewable sources to the choice of raw materials for its processes, to quality-control and official certifications for the processes themselves and the products). “Ever since the opportunity to create a forest arose in my brother’s office,” says Rosanna Figna, “I feel as if I’m in a fairy-tale. We had the land available, a 13-hectare plot that we had purchased after much persistence, but which in the end became entirely our property; added to which, we already had the carbon-footprint calculation; for the feasibility study we had to consult experts who could compare the data and who knew how to calculate the carbon dioxide sequestered by a developing forest. So, due to a series of fortunate coincidences”, and here she indicated Marco Benedetti with a gesture of joined hands and a smile, “I contacted CINSA, the Nation-

al Inter-University Consortium for Environmental Sciences, and proposed collaborating with them as project partners and joint implementers of the 'Grand Scheme'. Here I think it's important to emphasize that the entire project, and the forest so far, has been completely financed with private funds from the company."

However, the simple act of planting the trees, if they are not constantly monitored during the first years of adaptation, is equivalent to sentencing them to death: "So, with CINSA being aware of the complex relationships between living things and the mineral world, the study began by examining the soil down to the deepest layers and identifying areas suitable for specific tree species. Subsequently, the soil was fertilized, worked, and then left to temper. The Institute of Geopedology of the University of Milan-Bicocca and the Department of Forestry Sciences of Bari were involved in these two specific activities. A wood is above all a harmony of light and shade, of full and empty spaces, of rounded and more vertical forms. The project was designed by a landscape architect, Lisa Di Marco, who, giving consideration to which areas of the wood would be used and placing shrubs and plants according to certain guidelines, was able to recreate this harmony, continually mindful of the principle of biodiversity. "There are large specimens that create verticality and give the diversity that is typical of a forest. They will also monitor the other plants and serve as symbols. A forest is a complete biodynamic system, made up of the transformation of the subsoil, the surface, the climate that is created there and the air that purifies it. When designing it, we gave thought to all this and were also guided by a pact with the land, which will never be covered with concrete. This idea of sustainability commits us to the future."

A tender was organized to select the nursery that would supply the plants and bed them out: "It was a careful and thoughtful choice, we made many visits to the candidates involved and identified those who had the same passion as us. We started planting early, in

September 2021, because we had already come up with the outline for an irrigation system.

The project areas, identified according to the characteristics of the soil, were designed and planted with special techniques which were highly innovative and designed to ensure successful rooting. In addition to being first mycorrhized, a water-retainer was placed at the base of each plant: a natural polymer capable of absorbing and retaining water up to 350 times its weight, so as to always provide a water-reserve. An innovative choice was also made for mulching: for the first time ever all straw was used, with a special glue made from wheat and corn starch, so that it always adheres to the soil". The discussion broadens out by association, invoking Pachamama, the South American Mother Earth deity: "Our lines of straw that from above look like embroidery," continues Rosanna Figna, "are our recognition of the Earth; moreover, they are exactly the waste and nourishment of the wheat, its alpha and omega. The shelters are also made of marsh reeds, and therefore completely biodegradable after having fulfilled their protective function. Planting trees is not just a one-time activity; it involves supporting living organisms throughout their adaptation and development".

Great attention was also paid to the communication: "We used a very beautiful and fascinating symbol. I had thought of, in English, *Leaves for Life*, but then we thought that in Latin it was even richer in meaning: *Frondis Vitae*. In this motto, *Frondis Vitae*, there is a reference to the fact that the origin of our world is leaves: fragile, vulnerable, but always able to come back to life

after a bad season. Chloroplasts are the link that unites all organic activity, everything we call life. There are also other practices for carbon absorption that are hardly ever talked about, but we chose the forest for the environmental richness it can offer us, to celebrate nature and be-



cause Italy has the most prestigious cultural heritage in the world and we would like our Bosco to be part of that”.

“If we take a step back in our memory”, she says, again gesturing with her hand, “all fairy-tales are set in a forest; the ancients considered it a sacred place *par excellence*, the columns of temples are stylized tree trunks, the forest is the dwelling-place of gods and nymphs and, in Nordic countries, of elemental beings such as elves, goblins and fairies... in fact the forest provides protection from all types of bad weather and hides one from one’s enemies... I’ve called my work-group Sherwood!”

On one of the office walls there’s a picture that represents the large mill building that we can see from the window, but with a forest on the roof as well. “It’s a drawing that two architects gave me, I keep it here in full view because it always reminds me of the functions of our groups of trees. Modern architecture tries to allow water to seep into the ground and collect rainwater, to stem landslides, to create coolness in summer and prevent pollution... the forest does all this by itself. The climate crisis should be understood as part of a broader fragility, not just an environmental issue. Nature sometimes presents us with ultimatums, but it also makes environmental protection an opportunity. Concern alone is not enough to achieve CO₂ ‘capture’, we need far-sighted governance that allows the system to take full advantage of this transformation. Our company is working hard in this area, and we are aware that the critical sense and ethical tension of the consumer will increasingly focus on the national horizon, and on concrete and visible initiatives that can testify to the commitment of companies to the fate of the local community, an ethical duty towards future generations.”

“I would say that the forest is the result of the values of our families, which then culminated in the company”, says the company’s president, Alberto Figna (Rosanna’s brother). I meet him in Curtarolo, together with CEO, Riccardo Agugiario, between a board meeting and a departure for another destination in one of the almost one hundred countries to which the company exports. “The

forest didn't come about because someone woke up one day with the idea of creating a forest, but because it is a tangible interpretation of the values that permeate both our families and that have, so to speak, been grounded within the company." Riccardo Agugiario reiterates: "It's a precise choice made in the light of our family history. In a sense, it reflects what we've always been taught." When the idea emerged, says Alberto Figna, he was finally convinced when he asked his children what they would prefer to inherit one day, a few hundred thousand euros more or a 130,000 square metres of forest. Their answer was unanimous and decisive: the forest. "It's the antithesis to the 'everything and immediately' profitability of shareholder value. We believe that a company should not only represent monetisable value for the shareholder, but should also embody its own values, values that can be appreciated throughout an entire territory."

The conversation spontaneously turns to the topic of sustainability. Alberto Figna again: "For us, sustainability is something that is inherent in our DNA and to our profession, because a mill is by definition something sustainable. There were mills when there was no electricity. They used animal power, wind power, hydraulic power. It's part of our job, the primary transformation of a simple agricultural product into a durable food product that greatly contributes to people's energy needs. The word sustainability wouldn't have meant anything to my grandfather, it wasn't one of their problems: they only faced the problem of how to feed as many people as possible. That was their sustainability, the economic and energy sustainability of the people who had to live in the world." "There was a mill in every town, towns grew up around the mill. Then things were a bit different, our predecessors did things naturally that are not so natural for us today; when we do them, we have to publicise them to make them understood. We need to think not only about the sustainable environmental aspect, but also the social dimension. The forest embodies this very value, strong and very symbolic from an environmental point of view,

but also something that will remain for future generations, because the forest will grow day after day, already in ten years the trees will form a canopy at about ten meters above the ground and in half a century its majesty will delight those who will saunter through its clearings and along its paths: it is something made for future generations.”

Agugiaro & Figna

The company’s official name is Agugiaro & Figna Molini SpA and it has existed under this name since 2003, when two historic companies decided to merge: Molino Agugiaro in Curtarolo (in the province of Padua), managed by the Agugiaro family since 1831, and Molino Figna in Collecchio, founded in 1874 in Valera (in the province of Parma).

Companies in the milling sector meet in Italmopa, the Associazione Industriali Mugnai d’Italia (Italian Industrial Millers Association), and thanks to their membership of that association, the owners of the two mills had the opportunity of getting to know each other: while Agugiaro specialized in the production of semi-finished products for bread and pastry-making (and in particular for pizzas), Figna produced high-quality flours for industry (it is a long-standing supplier for Barilla, for example). They therefore operated in two very different markets and were not competitors: “when we put our customer databases together, a few thousand customers, we found that we only had three in common”, recalls Riccardo Agugiaro.

Molini Figna “was founded over ten generations ago, in Lugo di Romagna”, says Alberto Figna. “Then my great-great-grandfather, with six sons, which were too many for a small company like that, took his three youngest sons and moved to Parma. There were also daughters, but those were different times, they weren’t considered for the succession. Anyway, he moved to Parma with his