

## Gianicolo Busts

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I HAD NEVER SEEN ANYONE STOP in front of one of those busts that accompany Garibaldi, away up there on his horse, in the Gianicolo. They surround him and they sit on their pedestals along the grand, sycamore-lined streets that lead to him: Luigi Bartolucci, Ugo Bassi, Gustavo Modena, Angelo Tittori, Tomasso Salvini, Mattia Montechi, Riciotti, Bruno and Costante Garibaldi, Maurizio Quadrio, Achille Sachi, Quirico Filopanti, and maybe 50 or 60 more fighters for freedom and independence. There are busts, too, that line walks and roads in the Villa Borghese: national heroes, painters, musicians, scientists, aviators, poets, sculptors and architects, athletes. No one stops in front of them, either, except for a second or two. At least I've never seen anyone stop. Then one Saturday morning, early, before the bus loads of tourists arrived, a lady stopped in front of General Avezzana. She was slight, erect, well-dressed, mostly in blacks with an expensive-looking tailored coat, and she had with her a small terrier on a leash. She stood in front of the bust, looked at it two or three times, looked down and then back up into his face, crossed herself and walked away, in the direction of Porto San Pancrazio.

I had never seen anything like that happen. Those busts are wonderful. Somewhat larger than life-size, you have to look up at them, but not much. Each is on a pedestal. Some have wonderful hats, others uniforms cut off abruptly at the breast, still others are unadorned, seemingly in Roman style. They line the streets or walks. They have a rhythm to them as do the trees, but the busts are white, and they contrast with the greens and browns; white marble exclamation points against green, every twenty feet or so. These were real people. Very few have been toppled. Oh, sure, Rossini's nose, like some others, has been broken. But no one has

fooled around with Verdi. Just being there ties you to a past, to whatever they were or represented, even if you don't recognize the names. They catch the light and are very much present though no one seems to look at them. Sitting among them I had often wondered whether they were remembered as individuals. Was there a special day when the city put flowers or wreaths at their pedestals? A national heroes day, perhaps. Were their birthdays ever remembered? Was there anyone left to remember? I was certain that no one paid the statues any special attention. And then, that one day, there was that moment with the lady.

I wondered who she was. A daughter or granddaughter, or great-granddaughter? A grand niece? I could only imagine family. I wished it had been a lover, or long lost friend, or the daughter of a lover, or something like that. Did she care if she was seen? Avezzana looked very stern. I went back the next day, and every day for more than a week, at the same time as I had seen her. She never returned. I never saw her again.

The lady was an inspiration to me and my friends. Now on most Sunday mornings, we meet in front of one of those busts, at about 11:30 or noon, when there are a lot of people strolling, before lunch. We always go to one of the statues near where there are likely to be people. We pay homage to one of them. We give grand memorial speeches. We try to do it near his birthday. We bring flowers and wreaths. People come to see what is going on, then they gather round and listen, respectfully. Sometimes one of the women dresses up in black and wears a veil and stands next to one of us. I always wear a black arm band and black felt hat. I put my arms around her. She cries, with passion and force. Once or twice a year, when we can afford it, we hire a uniformed band—black and red, and white leather belts and gold buttons—and it plays rousing music. On those days, we go to two or three different busts, a bit distant from each other, and we pay homage all over again. Sometimes one of us, dressed dif-

ferently, interrupts a speech to let everyone know that our hero was not a hero at all but a fascist bastard, or a wife beater who left untold illegitimate children, or a communist pig, or lots of other things, and that we must therefore be fascist pigs, too. Sometimes a bastard great-grandchild, who just happens to be passing, denounces us. On some days there are fights and torn banners, and then we go have lunch and think about next week.

San Francisco should have a street lined with busts. They could be in Golden Gate Park, but a street would be better. Market Street! Market Street should have busts, about every 30 feet, on both sides, facing toward the sidewalks, from the Ferry Building to City Hall. That would be terrific! They would be in white marble and be about seven feet high. On one side of the street there would be mayors and official heroes of the city. There could be a special commission to decide on the heroes. It might get very political, but that would be all right. Over the years, it would even out as to who would be a hero worthy of a bust. The city would pay for the busts of some of the heroes, certainly for the mayors, but maybe it wouldn't have the money, at least not all at once, for all the heroes. It might take a while. The other side of the street would be for anyone. If I wanted to have a bust of myself, I could have one, as long as I paid for it and as long as I paid for one of the official city heroes on the other side. That way the whole idea wouldn't cost the city very much. I'd do it. I'd love to have the chance to have a statue of

myself on Market Street. Walter Shorenstein could have a statue too, if he wanted one. He could pay for Mayor Feinstein's bust and Willie Mays. If I had enough money I'd buy one for my mother. She never lived in San Francisco but otherwise, without a bust, I think she'll be forgotten, and I don't want that. And I'd get one of my father. And if I had enough money I'd get one of Ugo Bassi, not because I knew him or was related to him or anything like that, but because of the name: Ugo Bassi is a terrific name and there should be a bust of Ugo Bassi in every city. And there should be one of Ettore and one of Massimo. Fabulous names, famous names, worthy names.

After all the years of trying to make Market Street a great street and after all the money spent trying to do that, the busts might just do the trick; all those statues marching up Market Street. It's the kind of idea that a national government should do, in Washington, to line streets with heroes and presidents. People don't think like that anymore, least of all in Washington. They think, there, in small ways, of national security and centralized power and big business, not big ideas. Which is all the more reason for San Francisco to do it, alone; a celebration of history and future and of belonging to the community. In no time, other cities would take the idea and do it better, or not as well. There is enough space, on all the streets of San Francisco, to have busts of every person who ever was or ever will be a citizen. Now *there's* an idea.