

**ALLA CORRENTE**  
**Gino Bartali, “The Lion of Tuscany,” (1914- 2000)**

From Saturday June 29 to Sunday July 21, 2013, the 100th *Tour de France* will take place. This year it is made up of 21 stages and will cover a total distance of 3,479 kilometers (roughly 2,162 miles). Since this is the July 2013 Bulletin and since there is much interest amongst Cenacolisti about the *Tour*, I thought it would be appropriate to offer this *Alla Corrente* about an Italian participant in the *Tour* who won the race in 1938 and in 1948. This 10-year gap in victories set a record as the longest gap between victories in the *Tour*. He also won the *Giro d'Italia* three times (1936, 1937, and 1946). These racing victories made him the most renowned Italian cyclist prior to the Second World War. However, beyond his achievements as a bicycle racer, he was also a national hero who secretly aided the Italian resistance during World War II and secretly helped to save Jews during the Italian Holocaust and German occupation. A new book has recently been published, entitled *Road to Valor* by Aili and Andres McConnon, that relates his exploits and brings to light new information about his World War II activities.



**GINO BARTALI** was born in Florence on July 18, 1914, the third son of four children of a small landowner, Torello Bartali. As a young boy, he earned pocket money by selling raffia to makers of covers for wine bottles. He began work in a bicycle shop when he was 13. He started racing at the same age, became a promising amateur and turned professional in 1935 when he was 21. He was the Italian champion the next year. On November 14, 1940 Bartali married Adriana Bani in Florence. The wedding was celebrated by Cardinal Della Costa and was blessed by Pope Pius XII, to whom Bartali donated a bicycle.

Bartali won a stage of the 1935 *Giro d'Italia* and was King of the Mountains, the first of seven times he won that title in the *Giro*. In 1936, before he turned 22, he won the *Giro* and the *Giro di Lombardia*, although his season was marred when his brother, Giulio, died in a racing accident on June 14. Bartali came close to giving up cycling.

He was persuaded to return and in 1937 won the *Giro* victory again. His reputation outside Italy was that he was yet another Italian who couldn't ride well outside his own country. There was some truth in the claim. The writer Tim Hilton said: "Bartali was essentially an Italian cyclist, a champion who rode within sight of his own people, and was uneasy when the *Tour de France* travelled north of Paris. He never disputed the northern classics." Stung by the claim, he rode the *Tour de France* in 1937. He got off to a bad start, losing more than eight minutes by the third stage and more than ten by the *Ballon d'Alsace*, a mountain in the Vosges. There he came back to life and led by 1 minute, 14 seconds over the rest of the group and by enough over the leaders that he took the leader's jersey that night in Grenoble. But that was the end of his race. He and two helpers, Jules Rossi and Francesco Camusso, were riding a wooden bridge over the river Colau when Rossi skidded. Bartali rode into a parapet and fell into the river.

Roger Lapébie described the accident: "In the valley that leads to Briançon, I saw the accident to the *maillot jaune* [the wearer of the Yellow Jersey], Bartali. The narrow and bumpy road ran along the foot of a rock. Suddenly Rossi, who was leading, took a bend badly, braked and his back wheel hit the parapet of a bridge. Bartali, who was beside Rossi, couldn't get clear and I saw him fall over the bridge and into the little river three metres below." Camusso pulled him out. Bartali was cut to his arm and knee and had trouble breathing

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## ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued* Gino Bartali

because of a blow to the chest. He rode on to the end of the day, often pushed by his helpers. He finished ten minutes behind the rest but kept his lead.

He got through the Alps, by then having lost his yellow jersey, and left the race in Marseille. Before he dropped out, he warned the organizer, Henri Desgrange, about what he was going to do. Desgrange said: “You are the first rider to come to see me before dropping out. You’re a good man [*un brave garçon*], Gino. We’ll see each other again next year and you’ll win.”

He did return in 1938 and overcame the teamwork of the Belgians, the cold and rain, and a puncture on the *Col de l’Iseran*. He won the hardest stage, from Digne to Briançon by more than five minutes. The radio commentator Georges Briquet, after he had seen the crowds of Italians greeting Bartali with green, white and red flags, said: “These people had found a superman. Outside Bartali’s hotel at Aix-les-Bains, an Italian general was shouting ‘Don’t touch him—he’s a god.’” A public subscription started in his name in Italy and Benito Mussolini was among the contributors.



*Winning the 1946 Giro d'Italia.*

THE APPROACHING WAR led Italy not to send a team in 1939.



*Bartali left, Fausto Coppi right.  
(Picture courtesy of www.calciofans.com)*

BARTALI is mostly remembered for his long-standing battle with Fausto Coppi that resulted in epic physical struggles in the *Tour de France* (which he won twice), the *Giro d'Italia*, (which he won three times), the Milan-San Remo (which he won four times) and *Tour of Lombardy* (which he won three times). Bartali was five years older than Coppi and was the established star in Italian cycling.

At least as much as Coppi, but perhaps more so, World War II took its bite out of Bartali’s career, since the war happened during his peak athletic years (late twenties to early thirties).

Bartali won his first climber’s jersey in the *Giro* in 1935 at age 20 and won his last cycling monument classic in the 1950 Milan-San Remo at age 35. He rode professionally for twenty years and was competitive in major races even after age 40.

He was a great climber who won the mountains jersey competition in the *Giro d'Italia* a record seven times. He won five Grand Tour titles including the *Tour de France* twice and the *Giro d'Italia* three times. He was the first rider to win the *Tour de France* overall title and the mountains jersey in one year, 1938.

He repeated the same feat ten years later in 1948, the year in which he won seven stages of the *Tour*. These were the only years in which he won the *Tour de France*. He was second to Fausto Coppi in the 1949 *Tour de France*. In 1950, Bartali led the Italian team, but on the second mountain stage he was accosted by a drunken mob and threatened with a knife. The next day, the entire Italian team withdrew from the race.

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## ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

Gino Bartali

BARTALI grew up in a religious family in Tuscany, and his belief earned him the nickname “Gino the Pious.” He prayed before meals and resented when team-mates swore. In contrast, Coppi grew up in Piedmont in the north and was not religious at all. Bartali was proud that Pope John XXIII had asked him to teach him to ride a bicycle. He made no secret that he supported the Catholic-leaning Christian Democratic Party but his personality ensured that he was forgiven by the rival communists. Tim Hilton wrote: “Bartali was a genuinely religious man, making his devotions public and, in return, becoming the Vatican’s favourite sportsman—he was personally blessed by three popes. He would set up shrines in his hotel bedrooms when he rode the *Giro* and the *Tour de France*, and, on some mountains, children from summer camps sang canticles as he pedaled past, a priest conducting their infant worship.”

Nevertheless, Bartali was ruthless in a race. Early in his career, two famed Italian sprinters tried to box him in at the finish of a road race. Instead of going around them, he rode right between them, causing all three to crash in a bloody mess. After that, no one tried to box in Gino.

Bartali was frequently pessimistic. One of his customary phrases was “Everything’s wrong; we’ll have to start all over again.” The best the historian Pierre Chany could say of him was that while he often boasted of what he had done on mountains when nobody was there to see him, he had the grace never to tell the story differently.

### BARTALI IN WARTIME

Bartali has earned respect for his work in helping Jews who were being persecuted by the Nazis during the time of the Italian Social Republic. It became known in December, 2010 that he had hidden a Jewish family in his cellar and, according to one of the survivors, by doing so saved their lives.



Giorgio Nissim, a Jewish accountant from Pisa, was a member of DELASEM (Delegation for the Assistance of Emigrants), founded by the Union of the Israeli Communities to help Jewish Italians escape persecution. The network in Tuscany was discovered in autumn, 1943, and all members except Nissim were sent to concentration camps. Nissim met Pope Pius XII and, with the help of the Archbishop of Genoa, the Franciscan Friars and others he reorganized DELASEM and helped 800 Jews escape.

Nissim died in 2000. After his death, his sons discovered from his diaries that Bartali had used his fame to help in the struggle. Nissim and the Oblati Friars of Lucca had forged documents and necessary photographs of those they were helping. Bartali would leave Florence in the morning, pretending to be training for a race, ride to a convent in which the Jews were hiding, collect their photographs and ride back to Nissim. Bartali also used his position to learn about raids on safehouses, and warn DELASEM about them.

Bartali was eventually taken to Villa Triste in Florence. The SD and the Italian RSS office, under Mario Carità, questioned Bartali, threatening his life. Bartali simply answered “I do what I feel [in my heart].”

Bartali continued with the Assisi Underground. In 1943, he led Jewish refugees towards the Swiss Alps himself. He cycled up the mountain pulling a wagon with a secret compartment, telling patrols it was just part of his training regimen. Bartali told his son Andrea only that “one does these things and then that’s that.”

He also used his fame to carry messages and documents to the Italian Resistance. He cycled from Florence through Tuscany, Umbria, and Marche, sometimes traveling as far afield as Rome, all the while wearing the racing jersey emblazoned with his name. Neither the Fascist police nor the German troops risked discontent by arresting him.

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## ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

### Gino Bartali

#### ASSESSMENT OF HIS RACING CAREER

Bartali was a good climber and a pioneer of derailleur gears. His style was unusual: he rarely danced on the pedals and often stayed in the saddle throughout a 15 km climb. When others attacked, he stayed in the saddle but changed up gear, to a sprocket three teeth smaller. He rode smoothly on mountains, but every now and then freewheeled, always with his right foot lowered with his weight on it. Then a second or two later he would start pedaling again.



*1938 Tour de France: Gino Bartali is first over the Col de Vars in the 14th stage.*

Bartali's feat of winning three consecutive mountain stages (13, 14 and 15) in the 1948 Tour de France has never been equaled. It is one of the most astonishing accomplishments in the history of road cycling. It would be 50 years before anyone again won 3 consecutive stages, when Italian cyclist Mario Cipollini did so in the early (flat) stages of the 1999 *Tour de France*, winning four consecutive sprint finishes in stages 4, 5, 6 and 7.

#### FINAL YEARS

In 1954, at age 40, Bartali stopped racing after being injured in a road accident. By then he had lost much of his money. He lived modestly at 47 via Chantigiano, Florence in a home full of souvenirs.

He had a heart bypass operation and then died of a heart attack on May 5, 2000, at the age of 85. He had received the last rites ten days earlier. He left his wife, Adriana, two sons and a daughter. The prime minister of Italy at the time, Giuliano Amato, sent condolences. Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission, called him "a symbol of the most noble sportsmanship." The Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) called for two days of mourning, and silences were observed before sports events.

*Adapted from Wikipedia, <http://www.letour.com/le-tour/2013/us/e.com>, and Cycling Hall of Fame.com by James J. Boitano, Ph.D.*



*Autograph on the muretto of Alassio.*