



Road to Valor: A True Story of WWII Italy, the Nazis, and the Cyclist Who Inspired a Nation

By Aili McConnon, Andres McConnon

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***Road to Valor* is the inspiring, against-the-odds story of Gino Bartali, the cyclist who made the greatest comeback in Tour de France history and secretly aided the Italian resistance during World War II.**

Gino Bartali is best known as an Italian cycling legend: the man who not only won the Tour de France twice, but also holds the record for the longest time span between victories. During the ten years that separated his hard-won triumphs, his actions, both on and off the racecourse, ensured him a permanent place in Italian hearts and minds.

In *Road to Valor*, Aili and Andres McConnon chronicle Bartali's journey, starting in impoverished rural Tuscany where a scrawny, mischievous boy painstakingly saves his money to buy a bicycle and before long, is racking up wins throughout the country. At the age of 24, he stuns the world by winning the Tour de France and becomes an international sports icon.

But Mussolini's Fascists try to hijack his victory for propaganda purposes, derailing Bartali's career, and as the Nazis occupy Italy, Bartali undertakes secret and dangerous activities to help those being targeted. He shelters a family of Jews in an apartment he financed with his cycling winnings and is able to smuggle counterfeit identity documents hidden in his bicycle past Fascist and Nazi checkpoints because the soldiers recognize him as a national hero in training.

After the grueling wartime years, Bartali fights to rebuild his career as Italy emerges from the rubble. In 1948, the stakes are raised when midway through the Tour de France, an assassination attempt in Rome sparks nationwide political protests and riots. Despite numerous setbacks and a legendary snowstorm in the Alps, the chain-smoking, Chianti-loving, 34-year-old underdog comes back and wins the most difficult endurance competition on earth. Bartali's inspiring performance helps unite his fractured homeland and restore pride and spirit to a country still reeling from war and despair.

Set in Italy and France against the turbulent backdrop of an unforgiving sport and threatening politics, *Road to Valor* is the breathtaking account of one man's unsung heroism and his resilience in the face of adversity. Based on nearly ten years of research in Italy, France, and Israel, including interviews with Bartali's family, former teammates, a Holocaust survivor Bartali saved, and many others, *Road to Valor* is the first book ever written about Bartali in English and the only book written in any language to fully explore the scope of Bartali's wartime work. An epic tale of courage, comeback, and redemption, it is the untold story of one of the greatest athletes of the twentieth century.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A workmanlike biography that fills in some of the gaps of this strange, troubling time." ---Kirkus

About the Author

A Canadian journalist based in New York, Aili McConnon has written for BusinessWeek, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Guardian.

Andres McConnon has been a historical researcher for several books, including serving as the primary researcher on The Nazi Culture Sourcebook.

Actor Stephen Hoye is a graduate of London's Guildhall and a veteran of London's West End. An award-winning audiobook narrator, he has won thirteen AudioFile Earphones Awards and two prestigious APA Audie Awards.

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Across the Arno

When we race together, let's each win a little! This time you, and the next time me," Gino shouted ahead to his younger brother, Giulio, as they pedaled up the steep, sun-drenched hills surrounding Ponte a Ema. Their tires kicked up clouds of grit, and it was all Gino could do to avoid swallowing a mouthful. He rubbed a sweaty palm against his shorts, trying to brush off the stubborn rust flakes from his bike frame, and tucked his elbows in alongside his body, the way his idols did as they sprinted to victory, clutching their sleek curved handlebars. Gino leaned into the pedals and sped past Giulio. He turned and grinned at his younger brother as they started their descent toward home. They would race again tomorrow, and on that forgotten stretch of Tuscan road their tomorrows seemed endless.

Cycling had become the Bartali boys' passion, a flash of excitement and adventure in their tiny, workaday hometown. For Ponte a Ema in the 1920s was a sleepy place, just beyond the sophisticated world of Florence. Resting on the banks of the Ema, a tributary of the Arno River, Ponte a Ema brimmed with the vineyards, rolling hills, and waves of sweet lavender undulating out to the horizon, which have since made Tuscany world-renowned. Still, the village itself, located across a small bridge on the road from Florence to Bagno a Ripoli, looked like little more than an afterthought. One would be hard-pressed to find it on a map, hidden as it was some four miles southeast of Florence's central square. And though it included a short litany of establishments common to any small Italian town of the time--a church; a bank; a bike mechanic's shop; a simple barbershop; a grain mill; a small wine store; a five-room school set up in a farmer's house--it lacked a town hall and a proper piazza, the pulsing heart of Italian life where nonni, or grandparents, gather to play cards and stray cats dart out of the way of running children and bouncing soccer balls. Without a nucleus, Ponte a Ema conveyed the impression of an accidentally inhabited byway between more important places. That more important places existed would not occur to Gino until much later. Back then, Ponte a Ema was all the world a boy could want.

Born July 18, 1914, Gino Giovanni Bartali was a wispy, blue-eyed boy with a moppish head of curly dark

hair. He lived with his parents, Torello and Giulia, his older sisters, Anita and Natalina, and his brother, Giulio, in one of the cream-colored, three-story tenement buildings that lined Via Chiantigiana, Ponte a Ema's main street, where all the hubbub of daily life played out. Like most of the apartments along Chiantigiana, the Bartalis' consisted of one room and a small kitchen. Home reminded Gino of Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio and the humble abode of Geppetto, the hot-headed Tuscan carpenter who was known for getting into scuffles with anyone who insulted him. "The furniture could not have been much simpler: a very old chair, a rickety old bed, and a tumble-down table," wrote Collodi. "Little as Geppetto's house was, it was neat and comfortable."

The Bartalis' home possessed a similar modest charm. The children helped Giulia cart jugs of water from nearby springs. Together with several families, the Bartalis shared a privy at the end of the hall on their floor, which consisted of a hole in a bench through which refuse dropped into a small container on the ground floor. Running water, like electricity, would only come several decades later, after the end of the Second World War.

These were cramped quarters to be sure, but Gino didn't know any different. Besides, outdoors was where the action was. Along the road, the boys from town would huddle for hours around a game of marbles, keeping a stern eye on the rainbow array of tiny glass globes that already belonged to them, and hawkishly watching the ones that would soon join their collection if luck and skill were on their side that day. The game was serious business for Gino and his friends, and almost always ended in a violent brawl, broken up only by the clatter of a pair of dark green window shutters being flung open above to make way for somebody's mother leaning out to deliver a strident scolding. Gino always got a particularly severe tongue-lashing when he came home for dinner covered in bruises. Thin and undersized, a cuff from another child was enough to topple him to the ground, but that did little to deter him from bounding up and swinging right back. Gino knew he was the weakest, but he hated being teased. "I would have liked to have friends who didn't take advantage of being stronger than me so that they could beat me up after every game of marbles," he said later. Already headstrong as a youngster, however, he was willing to stand up for himself, even if the outcome was rarely favorable. "I was an unlucky marbles player, and an even unluckier boxer."

When he and his friends would scatter into the surrounding fields for games of tag or cops and robbers, winning and losing was a more straightforward affair and fisticuffs could be kept to a minimum. The orchards outside town were ideal for any pastime that involved hiding and chasing, draped as they were with row upon row of rippling white washing hung out to dry. For Ponte a Ema was a laundry town; many of its villagers labored for small businesses charged with cleaning the linens and finery of Florence's gentlemanly class. Men organized the transportation for this industry, picking up and delivering laundry with a mule pulling a dray. Women, predictably, bore the brunt of the dirty work. With brushes and lye ash soap, they scrubbed soft mountains until they were spotless. They cleaned shirts in large cement basins called viaios; they rinsed large bedsheets on the banks of the Ema River, by the ponte or bridge for which the town was named. Once each stain had been painstakingly removed, everything was carried out to the orchards and hung to dry in endless bay-scented fabric corridors, perfect for dodging potential jailers or for lying in wait to snatch a slippery thief and triumphantly march him back to town, where his punishment would be determined and duly meted out.

"As children we had fun with little, in fact nothing," Gino said. They played murielle, a game that involved tiles and smoothed stones, in the small rectangular schoolyard, and diecone in the Ponte a Ema cemetery; whoever knocked down the most graveside candles by rolling coins at them won the ten-cent piece. They would sneak off to the Arno for a forbidden swim--the river was known for claiming lives with its currents and sudden whirlpools, and Gino's mother once had to resort to stealing her son's clothes from its banks, forcing him to scurry home naked, to teach him a lesson. Most days, though, Gino and his friends would

scamper out of the water, get dressed, and, when somebody had a spare coin or two, run over to a riverside cookie factory that sold broken pieces of biscotti, with flavors like fig and sambuca, at an end-of-day discount.

Gino's favorite pastime was one he had to keep completely secret or risk an encounter with his father's leather belt. Torello's bicycle had always fascinated Gino and one day he hatched a plan to learn to ride atop it. It was far too big for a boy his size, but he was determined to master it. Like a bullfighter closing in on a bull in an arena, he approached it. Standing one foot on the left pedal, he slid his right leg under the crossbar to reach the right pedal. Balancing precariously, and much too short to sit on the bike seat, he stretched up to grip the handlebars from below. Crooked and wobbling, he learned painstakingly to maneuver the unwieldy contraption and barely noticed the smirks and giggles his clumsy expeditions elicited. He was too busy keeping his balance as he pedaled along Ponte a Ema's side streets.

Gino would have spent all of his waking hours outdoors at play if he could. Unfortunately, school was a constant interference. "I had little will to study," he said.

Gino's lack of discipline aggravated his father; his mother was irritated that her son had worn out more pairs of pants on the playground pavement than on the school benches where he was meant to be learning. Yet their lectures fell on deaf ears, and so a familiar scene began to play out regularly in the Bartali household.

"I don't like school, period," Gino would say.

"You are going and that's that," Torello would respond.

But Torello's persistence did not produce a scholar. Gino failed the first grade, and in the years that followed, the only charitable remark his teachers could muster about him as a student was that he had good personal hygiene. Still his father insisted he complete *la sesta*, the equivalent of sixth grade. Ponte a Ema's schoolhouse, however, only taught up to fifth grade--so Gino would have to travel to Florence to attend his final year. "To go to Florence you need a bicycle, and a bicycle costs money," Torello told his son. "You will have to earn it."

Like so many men of his era, Torello Bartali was the primary bread-winner of his family. Although his name meant "young bull" in Italian, Torello moved with the quiet ease of an old workhorse. The features of his face betrayed little about him. He always wore a beret, and a thick mustache covered the edges of his mouth, from which normally dangled a cigar. His physique was more revealing. Short and sinewy, he had a body of considerable strength.

Torello was used to hard work, but his job stability as a day laborer did little to inspire confidence. He worked principally in the fields, and when that type of job wasn't available, he worked in a local quarry, which mined the bluish shale used to pave the neighboring streets of Florence. When quarry work couldn't be found, Torello worked as a bricklayer, laying the foundation for countless Florentine homes. When both of those jobs were in short supply, he went down to the Arno River to collect sand that in turn was used for making cement. And as a last resort, he picked up work extinguishing the oil-fueled street lamps at dawn. For all his efforts, a laborer like Torello earned little more than the modern equivalent of about a dollar an hour.

Necessity forced Giulia to work as well, even if a woman's hourly wage in that era was often less than half a

man's. In fact, money was so scarce in the Bartali household that Giulia barely made it home in time to give birth to Gino because she had hiked to a hillside convent that same morning to inquire about a maid's position. Like Torello, she toiled for long days in the fields, tending to the crops and the vines. Though she was small and sturdy, this heavy manual labor took its toll, and she was often plagued with severe leg pains. But Giulia was as ingenious as she was resilient. After particularly punishing days, she would soak a cloth in vinegar and salt, wring it out, and hold it against her legs for five minutes. For more severe pain, she rubbed a compress of wet cigar stubs over the sore areas until the pain subsided.

Primitive as they were, such remedies allowed Giulia to endure a workday that continued well after the sun set. After the long hours in the fields, Giulia spent her evenings earning extra money by embroidering, creating the kind of fine lacework found in the bridal trousseau of any Florentine woman of means. The work of running her household and feeding her husband and four children was balanced precariously atop her other labors. All of this added up to a hardscrabble life that paused only on Sundays, but it was hardly a unique one in Ponte a Ema or even the rest of Tuscany. In the early part of the twentieth century, Tuscan peasants worked an average of fourteen hours per day and a third more of the calendar year than Italians today.

Torello had already given Gino more than one dressing-down about the value of a lira. When Gino would meekly take his seat at the dinner table, hair tousled from his schoolyard scuffles, he knew he could expect the usual admonishment: "Money is necessary for food and certainly not for buying books for a boy who uses them to hit his friends over the head with." La sesta was fast approaching, and with it the need for transportation. Twelve-year-old Gino had to find a job. Though he and Giulio had helped their mother and sisters make embroidery for as long as they could remember (Gino was particularly skilled at making lace), his father believed it was time his elder boy found work of his own. Gino was too weak to begin apprenticing as a day laborer or bricklayer with his father, so Giulia decided to ask around for a simple and minimally strenuous position for her son. After some time, she found some farmers in a nearby town looking for a boy to help unravel piles of raffia, the long fibers from the leaves of certain palm trees, whose threads could be used to make ties for grapevines and delicate nursery plants. The work was easy enough, but for an energetic boy who longed to be outside with his friends, it was also an exercise in excruciating boredom. Only the promise of his very own bicycle kept Gino focused on the task at hand.

Consumed by his new goal, Gino was mesmerized by bikes wherever he saw them. But Ponte a Ema was not a worldly place. No races ever passed through town. The only groups of men cycling together that Gino saw were bricklayers on their way to work in Florence. They would ride by on their bicycles, many of them without pedals, which were too expensive to replace once broken. "A lot of time was still to pass before I set eyes on a sports paper and before I knew about the existence of a world in which you could go racing in a pair of black shorts and a colored jersey." Still, he kept working to earn money for his own bicycle, and in the meantime he snuck in rides on his father's, slowly acquainting himself with the vehicle that would change his life.

The bicycle had been born more than a century before Gino, but the earliest versions were little more than wooden horses mounted on wheels. In 1790 in Paris, a Frenchman rode one of these devices in a rudimentary race around the Champs-Élysées. In the late 1830s, a Scottish blacksmith named Kirkpatrick Macmillan experimented with building a hobby-horse with pedals so that a rider did not need to push off the ground to propel the machine forward. This pricey new amusement quickly became popular in North America. Oliver

Wendell Holmes describes the years before the Civil War in the United States when "some of the Harvard College students who boarded in my neighborhood had these machines they called velocipedes, on which they used to waddle along like so many ducks."

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