

Wikipedia Angeli del fango _ English translation of the Italian voice.
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The “mud Angels”

The “mud angels” were all those (the majority of them were youngsters), who helped the locals to face the emergency caused by the 1966 flood of the Arno in Florence. The “mud angels” hence helped the city to recover in the first months after the flood. They were young volunteers coming from all over the world and from various Italian regions. Among them there were both foreigners, who were already living in Florence and foreigners, who arrived after the disaster, in order to help the population damaged by the flood and to rescue from the mud works of art, paintings, statues and books, which would have otherwise gone lost. The youngsters, who rushed to Florence, worked together with Italian and international volunteers and were financial aided by several countries around the world. They represented thus an example of global solidarity in front of a great natural disaster.

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Origins of the name

Although lexicographic investigations concerning the origins of the name “mud angels” are still under way, the Florentine journalist Giovanni Grazzini was the first one to use it in an article on the “Corriere della Sera” on November the 10th 1966ⁱ ⁱⁱ The name was initially used to refer to young volunteers helping in the *Santa Croce* district. It took on its current meaning over time thanks mostly to Florentine Mayor Piero

Bargellini, who used it in his works. Since 1969 Bargellini has been internationally known as the “Mayor of the Flood”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Angel means in Greek etymology “the announcer” or “the messenger”, who coming from a certain place arrives to another one^{iv}.

The expression has then been used since the Genoa flood of 1970 in other catastrophic events (especially floods), to indicate all those (mainly youngsters), who helped the damaged population. These acts of solidarity however cannot be compared to the ones witnessed in Florence and Tuscany, which were characterised by national and international citizens. Such acts observed in 1966 were a response to the damages to the cultural heritage, which is symbolically belonging to the entire humanity^v ^{vi}.

During the catastrophes in the most recent decades and in particular after the birth of the Italian Civil Defence, the rescue interventions are professionally organised by the state and regional authorities. The interventions of non-organised or non-trained people are often discouraged, unless they are included in the plans of the Civil Defence and they are limited to actions that do not require specific professional skills.

Who were the “mud angels”

The name “mud angels” should therefore be applied to those, who were not locals and, who had no specific interests in clearing streets or houses and cleaning up churches, libraries and museums that did not belong to their normal routine, but were perceived as a world heritage. In fact, if it is true that several young and very young Florentines living in non-flooded areas, who volunteered, they do not want to be considered “angels”^{vii}. A quite widespread tendency in Florence, along with the gratitude for the help received, is the willing to clearly distinguish the actions of the local community and of the local associations, as an expression of a certain sense of civic duty from the contributions of the “angel muds” and generally speaking from the national and international^{viii} solidarity.

Sometimes, in a wider sense, members of the Military, of the Fire and Rescue Service and of Public Health Care Organisations have been called “mud angels”, since their actions transcended their institutional or constitutive duty^{ix}. Plenty of artists, politicians, journalists, writers and poets arrived in Florence after the flood and became famous in the following years. Here some of them^x: Joan Baez, Gualtiero Bassetti^{xi}, Pier Luigi Bersani^{xii}, Giuseppe Betori^{xiii}, Massimo D'Alema, Francesco De Gregori, Joschka Fischer, Giuliano Pisapia^{xiv}, and Antonello Venditti^{xv}.

Where the “mud angels” came from

In the two months following the flood the number of young people, who arrived to Florence spontaneously or in arranged groups (organised by schools, universities, scout movements and so on) for short periods of time, is uncertain. According to some a posteriori estimates there might have been around 12.000^{xvi} volunteers. As for scouts, for the whole after-flood period there were 7.000^{xvii} organised volunteers. The two associations that promptly arrived just a few hours after the disaster were the ASCI (today's AGESCI) and CNGEI. As for the academic world, after a few days about 1.000 students volunteered: they provided first aid with the organisational help of the “ORUF” (Organismo Rappresentativo degli Universitari Fiorentini). They were divided into teams and gave assistance to local organisations during the operations. As early as November the 6th they reopened the canteen of “Sant'Apollonia”, in order to provide meals daily^{xviii}.

There are also other calculations based on the data of that period provided by the reception facilities: they did not count the youngsters, who arrived for a single day^{xix}. Various evaluations are reported in several publications and lists belonging to the “mud angels” mostly based on self-declarations made at different moments (the vast majority of them were collected during the “Raduni degli Angeli” usually organised every ten years). About 2.000 “mud angels” took part at the 40th anniversary of 2006^{xxxi}. The Italian provinces not damaged by the flood that contributed the most were: Florence (Prato, Fiesole, Sesto Fiorentino, etc), Pistoia, Lucca and Arezzo. Many young volunteers arrived from Emilia Romagna in particular from the area of Bologna. It is in fact in Bologna that the largest associations of the “Angeli

fiorentini” was established. Its name was “Comitato Bolognese degli Angeli del Fango” and in the following years it also gave assistance and support^{xxii}. As for the foreigners, many were Americans, who were already studying in Florence and, who immediately intervened. There were several British, French and German citizens as well.

At the commemoration for the 50th anniversary of the flood about a thousand ex-volunteers were present. More than 600 volunteers were digitally registered in the computer archives of the “angels”, which was created within the framework of the “Toscana Firenze 2016”^{xxiii} project and, which later was merged into the CEDAF project about the “mud angels”^{xxiv xxv xxvi}.

Set-up

The youngsters, who arrived in the first days after November the 4th 1966 initially slept on the trains, made available by the “Ferrovie dello Stato” and in the hostels. They slept therefore in temporary accommodations organised by various institutions including religious institutions, such as the “Scout fiorentini” coordinated by Luca Uzzelli, Giannozzo Pucci e Marco Cellai, who were asked to give help by the Major of the city Piero Bargellini^{xxvii}. Even the institutions, where the youngsters provided first aid during the day, quickly provided organised reception, food and accommodation solutions. At the National Central Library of Florence there was a vaccination hub. Meals, products for the personal hygiene and equipment were distributed there. Shifts as well were decided there. Around 60 volunteers working in the Library were hosted in Villa Fabbriotti^{xxviii}.

Plenty of families around the city welcomed the youngsters of the so-called “first-wave”, which ended on New Year’s Eve with a torchlight procession from the Basilica di San Miniato to Piazza Santa Croce. The volunteers, who arrived in Florence in January 1967 belonged to the “second wave”. The new “angels” joined, in order to keep on helping in shops, homes or at public institutions, where they had already helped. They could rely on a better organised reception: they were hosted and they were offered reimbursement for the expenses by those helped by them or by national and international rescue organisations, which were had been established in the meantime and, which operated in the field of the cultural property. An example could be the American CRIA (Committee to Rescue Italian Art)^{xxix}, which not only carried out several important projects for the rescue and restoration of a variety of types of cultural property; it also gave the opportunity to many American young students to take part into the project^{xxx}.

Activities

In the first two months the youngsters cleaned and cleared the damaged buildings (private homes, cellars, shops) from the mud and from fuel oils, with the aim of salvaging private objects and most of all cultural properties previously kept in damaged churches, libraries, archives and museums. Such objects had to be quickly removed from damp, dirt and mud and undergo an initial restoration work. The rescue of the books in the underground of the National Central Library of Florence buried under the mud has become a symbol of the flood to the point that for the first commemoration of the flood a commemorative plaque was placed in the porch at the entrance in remembrance of the young volunteers, who worked, as Bruno Migliorini the president of the “Accademia della Crusca”^{xxxi} back then stated, “between water and mud with generous abnegation” (“tra l’acqua ed il fango con generosa abnegazione”).

Already in January 1967 the city had been substantially cleaned and the cultural properties had been secured. The rapid emergency operations, where young people could take part into, did not require specific professional skills. However there were still many homes and shops requiring interventions. The “second wave” of the “mud angels” contributed to the reconstruction, which was then completed by Florentine citizens, governmental, municipal and regional organisations and by national or international aid organisations. The majority of these were situated in the Florentine neighbourhoods and run by parishes or by people’s houses.

Operations at the National Central Library of Florence

It is thanks to the director of the National Central Library of Florence, Emanuele Casamassima^{xxxii}, that the young volunteers were allowed to enter the library storerooms already on November the 5th, in order to salvage all the damaged works by building human chains (in the real sense of the word). At the very beginning the youngsters had not even the minimum equipment like boots or rubber gloves to remove the volumes from the mud and take them to safe places, with the aim of beginning with the first operations like the drying process. It is estimated that during this emergency phase an average of about 500 volunteers (with peaks of about one thousand^{xxxiii}) were in action daily. The staff of the most important Italian library, as well as fifty available soldiers, took part into the operations^{xxxiv}. One week later, when the circulation in the streets partially restarted again, the rescued books were directly put on the vehicles in piazza Cavalleggeri and were brought to places, where they could be dried and cleaned. In spite of the impromptu begin of the volunteers and the true difficulties, priorities were immediately identified and instructions about the way damaged books had to be handled and stored given to the “mud angels”^{xxxv}. The organisation for the emergency management set up in the BNCF (National Central Library of Florence) was not just a symbol, as after the catastrophe it became a model for the various libraries and archives in the city. Thanks to the labour given by the “angel muds” it was possible to quickly salvage items and prevent their loss due to mould or other microorganisms^{xxxvi}.

Of all the various rescue operations at the National Central Library of Florence, as well as of the daily life of the “mud angels”, we have many photographic documents at the library itself. The records have become public after the exhibition of the 50th anniversary^{xxxvii}.

Reasons for taking part into the operations

The reasons why so many youngsters went to Florence have been well explained by Edward Kennedy during his visit to the National Central Library of Florence, which was then immortalised in some famous photographs of David Lees^{xxxviii}.

«[...] In every point in the reading room there were hundreds of youngsters, who had gathered to help. It was as if they knew that the flood of the library was putting their souls at risk. I found an incredible inspiration in seeing this younger generation united in making this common effort»

(Sandro Pintus Silvia Messeri, *Novembre 1966 L'alluvione a Firenze*)

The youngsters felt that they were losing the roots of their future, which was represented by the endangered books.

A decisive role in making the youngsters come to Florence was played by the national and international media. The documentary made in early December 1966 by Franco Zeffirelli and Richard Burton^{xxxix} had a global impact. The film dedicated a certain space to the international “mud angels” and consolidated hence their image. That crowd of young volunteers in Florence can be seen as part of the evolution of the concept of “youth” in the 60s, which was beginning to spread all over the world. This phenomenon was already present before the flood^{xl}, as youth hostels show us.

Books and media have often been highlighting the link between the Florentine youngsters and the following protest movements represented in films like “The best of youth” by Marco Tullio Giordana, even though there was a certain difference between the “rebuilding” spirit of the “mud angels” and the “demolishing/protesting” spirit of student activism^{xli}.

Documents and testimonials

There are numerous books and articles on the subject, but they are mainly in the form of the chronicle or in the form of personal memoirs. There is a rich collection of mostly black and white photographs that witness the action of the “mud angels” in the various places of Florence. Among the most significant collections there is a collection in the National Central Library of Florence, which is entirely digitalized and is totally accessible online^{xlii}.

The documentaries and amateur videos produced in the weeks following the flood are not numerous. Interviews and quotations about the “angels” were included in documentaries concerning also other protagonists of the rescue operations^{xliii}.

The majority of the documentaries and films of RAI in the fifty years after the 1966 are now available on Raiplay^{xliv xlv}.

The impact of the 1966 flood of the Arno on the following social and political developments at the end of the 1960s years has been extensively quoted and analysed in books, articles and films.

For the 50th anniversary Alessandro Barbieri^{xlvi} composed four songs dedicated to the “mud angels”.

In 2016 Francesco Niccolini wrote the play "Il filo dell'Acqua"^{xlvii}, which was then performed by the Cooperativa Arca Azzurra on the occasion of the 50th anniversary.

Certain novels or even detective-stories, like for instance the ones by Leonardo Gori^{xlviii}, Fabio Baldassarri^{xlix} and Laura Nicastrò^l contain references to the “mud angels”.

The anniversaries:

1996 30th anniversary

In remembrance of the 1966 floods, the ceremonies were jointly organised by the mayors of Florence, Mario Primicerio, and Venice, Massimo Cacciari^{li}.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary Gaetano Auzzi’s monument "Stele dell’Amicizia" was restored and placed in Piazza Poggi in the San Niccolò neighbourhood. It had been inaugurated on November the 4th 1976 and created with the support of the local authorities for the 10th anniversary of the flood.

2006 40th anniversary

It was the most well-attended gathering anniversary organised by the municipality of Florence and coordinated by Erasmo D’Angelis^{lii}. Two thousand angels attended the ceremony.

2016 50th anniversary

On November the 4th 2016 the anniversary was celebrated in the Salone dei Cinquecento in Palazzo Vecchio in the presence of the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella. A torchlight procession of the volunteers was organised as well^{liii liv}.

On this occasion, the official archive of the “mud angels” was created by the Comitato Toscana Firenze 2016 and by Fondazione Sistema Toscana^{lv}. It then incorporated into the CEDAF.

The commemorative stamp created by Poste Italiane

Poste Italiane created the commemorative stamp of the “mud angels” on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the flood with the winning drawing of the primary schools’ competition organised by Comitato Toscana Firenze 2016 and by Consiglio Regionale della Toscana. The competition was inspired by the collection of drawings and stories of the children, who experience the flood^{lvi}.

See Also

1966 Flood of the Arno

Florence

History of Florence

Florence: Days of Destruction

Notes

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- ⁱ Giovanni Grazzini, *Si calano nel buio della melma*, in *Corriere della Sera*, November 10th 1966. «Chi viene, anche il più cinico, anche il più torpido, capisce subito [...] che d'ora innanzi non sarà più permesso a nessuno fare dei sarcasmi sui giovani beats. Perché questa stessa gioventù [...] oggi ha dato [...] un esempio meraviglioso, spinta dalla gioia di mostrarsi utile, di prestare la propria forza e il proprio entusiasmo per la salvezza di un bene comune. Onore ai beats, onore agli angeli del fango.».
- ⁱⁱ Elisa Di Renzo, Neil Harris and Associazione italiana biblioteche, *Una biblioteca, un'alluvione : il 4 novembre 1966 alla Nazionale di Firenze: storia di un'emergenza*, Associazione italiana biblioteche, 2009, pp. 150-153, ISBN 978-88-7812-201-7, OCLC 646048375 (23.2.2021).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Piero Bargellini, *Gli angeli del fango*, *Splendida storia di Firenze*, pp. 259-268.
- ^{iv} *L'angelo del fango*, in *Progettando.ing (Numero speciale: 1966. Memorie di un'alluvione)*, XI (2016), n. 4 ottobre-dicembre, pp. 5-18.
- ^v The Florentine city centre will be a UNESCO cultural world heritage <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/174>.
- ^{vi} CRIA- Harvard University, on cria.itatti.harvard.edu.
- ^{vii} Franco Quercioli, *Non siamo Angeli*, in *Testimonianze*, n. 504-505-506.
- ^{viii} *Non siamo angeli* Video Sergio Canfailla Lorenzo Giudici, on video.repubblica.it.
- ^{ix} Franco Mariani, Mattia Lattanzi, *Firenze 1966: L'alluvione: risorgere dal fango: testimonianze, documenti, memorie di una città offesa*, Florence-Milan, Giunti, 2016.
- ^x *Corriere.it, Firenze 1966: così gli angeli del fango salvarono la città*, on *Corriere della Sera*. (31.1.2021).
- ^{xi} *Testimonianze Angeli del Fango*, on corriere.it.
- ^{xii} Result from Google images
https://images2.corriereobjects.it/reportages/cronache/2016/alluvionefirenze/img/cronologia/bersani_alluvione_firenze.jpg, on www.google.com. (31.1.2021).
- ^{xiii} *Testimonianze Angeli del Fango*, on corriere.it.
- ^{xiv} *Ibd.*
- ^{xv} *Ibd.*
- ^{xvi} A. Iuso, *Angeli alla conquista del fango*, in *Testimonianze*, 2016 monographic volume *La Grande Alluvione*, 504-505-506 pag. 54-59.
- ^{xvii} Ottavo Gruppo, *4 NOVEMBRE 1966 – gli "angeli del fango"*, on *Milano 8 Qafila*, 5 novembre 2013. (31.1.2021).
- ^{xviii} E. di Renzo, *Una biblioteca, un'alluvione*, p. 147.
- ^{xix} *La Grande Alluvione*. Monographic volume, in *Testimonianze*, n. 504-505-506.
- ^{xx} In Erasmo D'Angelis' book we find 1350 "mud angels". Most of them are Italian names but 250 are foreign names from around 30 countries.
- ^{xxi} Erasmo D'Angelis, *Angeli del Fango*, Florence, Giunti, 2006.
- ^{xxii} Maria Iacuraniello, Eleonora Pantano e Enrico Bollino, *Solidarietà e utopia. Bologna, gli Angeli del Fango e le alluvioni del 1966*, CLUEP, 2016.
- ^{xxiii} *2016 Alluvione Le Alluvioni*, on toscana.firenze2016.it.
- ^{xxiv} CEDAF Centro di Documentazione sulle alluvioni di Firenze, on sba.unifi.it.
- ^{xxv} *Archivio Angeli del Fango*, on sba.unifi.it.
- ^{xxvi} The members of December 2016 authorised to disclose their identity and decided to enrich the collection of CEDAF with unpublished documentation. The archive is constantly updated.
- ^{xxvii} Piero Bargellini, *Il miracolo di Firenze: i giorni dell'alluvione e gli angeli del fango*, Società editrice fiorentina, 2006.
- ^{xxviii} *Una battaglia della cultura. Emanuele Casamassima e le biblioteche*, pp. 145.154.
- ^{xxix} *Mostra documentaria online sul CRIA elaborata a I Villa I Tatti, sede della Harvard University, che ne conserva l'archivio*, on cria.itatti.harvard.edu.
- ^{xxx} *Una biblioteca, un'alluvione*, p. 102-109.
- ^{xxxi} Commemorative plaque dedicated to the "mud angels" under the porch of the National Central Library of Florence (JPG), on upload.wikimedia.org
- ^{xxxii} *Emanuele Casamassima*, on aib.it.
- ^{xxxiii} Giorgio de Gregori, biography on the website AIB, on aib.it.
- ^{xxxiv} Elisa di Renzo, *Una biblioteca, un'alluvione*, p. 160.
- ^{xxxv} Tiziana Stagi, *Una battaglia della cultura. Emanuele Casamassima e le biblioteche*, pp. 147- 149.
- ^{xxxvi} Elisa di Renzo, *Una biblioteca, un'alluvione*, pp. 145-146.

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- ^{xxxvii} Archive with photographs of the 1966 flood of the Arno at the National Central Library of Florence, on arno66ar.it.
- ^{xxxviii} Edward Kennedy's souvenir and photo with youngsters at the National Central Library of Florence, on corriere.it.
- ^{xxxix} *Per Firenze*, on raiplay.it.
- ^{xl} Richard Jobs, *Florence's Mud Angels. Backpsckers (sic), traveling through Europe, forget a new wave of international collaboration*, in *Hystory Today*, vol. 67, 8.7.2017.
- ^{xli} Elisa di Renzo, *Una biblioteca, un'alluvione. Il 4 novembre 1966 alla Nazionale di Firenze: storia di un'emergenza*, Rome, Associazione Italiana Biblioteche, 2009, ISBN 978-88-7812- 201-7.di renzo (bok in biliography)
- ^{xlii} *Osee Genius - Biblioteca nazionale di Firenze*, on opac.bncf.firenze.sbn.it. (19.2.2021)
- ^{xliii} *Per Firenze*, on raiplay.it.
- ^{xliv} *Firenze - 4 novembre 1966 - Ritorno a Firenze* (by E.Fede, 18.4.67) – Video on RaiPlay (1.2.2021).
- ^{xlv} *Memorie - Fatti e persone da ricordare - L'alluvione di Firenze, per non dimenticare* - Video, on RaiPlay (1.2.2021).
- ^{xlvi} *Angeli del fango*, on youtube.com.
- ^{xlvii} Francesco Niccolini, *Il filo dell'acqua*, *Scienza Ezpress*, 2016, ISBN 978-88-96973-64-6.
- ^{xlviii} Leonardo Gori, *L'Angelo del Fango*, Milan: TEA, 2005.
- ^{xlix} Fabio Baldassarri, *Sulle ali degli angeli del fango*, Robin, 2016.
- ^l Laura Nicastro, *Gli Angeli del Fango*, Ute libri, 2012.
- ^{li} *Firenze - 4 novembre 1966 - Gli "Angeli del Fango" trent'anni dopo* (TGR Ambiente Italia) - Video, on RaiPlay. (1.2.2021).
- ^{lii} Erasmo D'Angelis, *Angeli del fango: la meglio gioventù nella Firenze dell'alluvione*, Florence-Milan, Giunti, 2006.
- ^{liii} Torchlight procession on November the 4th 2016, on firenzetoday.it.
- ^{liv} Interview with Antonina Bargellini 2013, on youtube.com.
- ^{lv} *Toscana Firenze 2016*, on Fondazione Sistema Toscana (14.1.2021).
- ^{lvi} Idana Pescioli, *Com'era l'acqua*, La Nuova Italia, 1967.

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Giampaolo Mignani, *Salvare la Grande Signora : come divenni un angelo del fango*, in *Pègaso: periodico di cultura, arte, costume*, 196 (sett.-dic. 2016), NICOMP, 2016, pp. 20-21.

Laura Nicastro, *Gli angeli del fango*, Verdellino Nicastro, UteLibri, 2012, ISBN 9788867360116.

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Massimo Ruffilli, *Noi eravamo gli "angeli del fango*, in *Il governo delle idee : mensile di politica, cultura, economia*, Edizioni della Meridiana, 2016, pp. 17-20. 45.

Tiziana Stagi, *Una battaglia della cultura. Emanuele Casamassima e le biblioteche*, Rome, Associazione Italiana Biblioteche, 2013.

Further reading

Wikiquote contains quotations of/about the “mud angels”.

External links

Photogallery with original photographs (<https://web.archive.org/web/20080927230717/http://www.angeli delfango.it/photogallery/album.htm>) (requiresFlash).

Website of the survivors (<http://www.angelidelfango.it/index2.html>).