

Merckx, il Figlio del tuono [Merckx, son of thunder] di Claudio Gregori
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Merckx, the thunder's Son di Claudio Gregori

On 20th March 1966, a young Belgian is on the start line of the Italian bike race Milano-Sanremo. He is only 20 years old and has never tried such a challenging course, yet this will be his first great win. A new age is starting for cycling, just as Fausto Coppi had initiated one at the end of the Second World War. At the end of his career the Belgian man had collected eleven big Tours, thirty-two Classics and three Cycling World championships in his palmarès. None had won so much before! He was named Ogre, Crocodile, Attila, and the Cannibal. Always feared and envied, Merckx has been «the major agonist» of a difficult and at times cruel sport. Claudio Gregori recounts his achievements, since his debut in Van Looy's team, as if they were the adventures of a fearless knight in search of fabulous treasures in a new *chanson de geste*, giving us the pleasure to re-live his magic races once again.

Claudio Gregori (Trento, 1945) has worked for four newspapers, such as «La Gazzetta dello Sport» and «il Giornale» by Indro Montanelli. He wrote the entry «Storia del ciclismo» for the Treccani encyclopaedia, together with the inserts about doping and timing.

1. The beginning

The bird culture

Sanremo, 20th March 1966

Montesquieu's ancient Persian dream of a «bird culture», opposed to an «elephant culture», has always been the goal of every cyclist. They all look for lightness, speed, flight, and adventure. The very opposite of a slow, heavy and rhythmic pace imposed by gravity. They prefer novelty to routines, free space over a crowded world. Cyclists are migrants; their life is closely linked to the seasons. They belong to the sun and choose freedom to move in the universe's vastness. Wheels are their wings.

Yet biking is not only an adventure in the open. It is also a journey inside the depth of the human soul. Biking tests greatness and pain. It means patience and sacrifice; it goes across the heart, not only space.

Biking has its own Mecca, the holy place where migrant cyclists always go back to. The Milano-Sanremo is not only a race; it's a real ritual. As the first big race of the year, bikes leave their lethargy gliding towards the sea. It opens the spring season. March's rain fertilizes the land. Sun and sea give us flashes of fire. It's a new birth. Windows open like sprouting buds. New glances meet and smiles flourish. The road tingles under the wheels. That's the beauty of beginnings.

Sanremo overlooks the blue sea loved by Shelley and Pound, or, equally, by Montale and Quasimodo.

The rider becomes a whistling wind, the group, looking like petals falling down in the waves and their foam patterns, moves downwards to the *Mare nostrum*, which once attracted Saracens and Vikings. It is 20th March 1966. On the start line there is a new man with a black and white chequered jersey. He is number 131 and he is the youngest rider, only 20 years old. He never ran such a long race, 288 km. He rides together with the Peugeot, a small team, made up by the Belgians Bracke and Mertens, the French Pingeon, Letort and Niel. The team director Gaston Plaud is in the team car.

That guy is from Bruxelles. He is going south following Rubens's and Van Dyck's tracks. He looks around to catch all these new wonderful colours. He is on a discovering journey. He doesn't yet know the words of that race: the *Turchino*, the *three Capi*, the *Poggio*.

He has a cryptic and mysterious name: Merckx. X identifies the enigma, the mathematic unknown quantity.

The writer Italo Calvino was born in Sanremo. There he studied and he discovered love, writing and the bicycle. His parents were botanists in Sanremo, internationally known as the city of flowers. That was the right place to flourish, here Fausto Coppi's legend flourished too.

On 14th March 1907 the Milano-Sanremo race initiated the Italian international cycling era with a battle amongst champions. The Italians competed against the French like the two nations did in the ancient challenge of Barletta. At the time the French had won.

The order of arrival had been at royal levels. Only three of the top cyclists came to compete for the last sprint and Gerbi, the lowest-ranked, known as the «Red Davil», had pulled Garrigou down, just to let his mate Petit-Breton win. They had arranged to share the prize in case of victory. Since the beginning, it had been a glorious race and a «thriller», at the same time.

Belgians had won the race eight times before. Five times in the previous twelve years. The first one had been Cyrille Vanhouewaert. On the 5th of April 1908, he had taken the lead on the sleet of the Turchino mountain pass, near Sanremo, together with the French Lignon. After having thwarted Ganna's upturn, fighting against wind, rain and frost, he was alone at his arrival at Finale Ligure. At the end he reached Sanremo with an advantage of 3 minutes and 30 seconds. Two weeks later he won the Roubaix race too.

A couple of years later, he would have tried the same venture. On the 3rd of April 1910 he lead the group on the Turchino pushing the bike by hand in a snowstorm. The French Christophe, with frozen moustaches, followed him and was 9 minutes away, but he was the first to cross the finish line before the other four survivors.

Vanhouewaert was a farmer. When he was 16 he rode a bike for the first time. One day, riding, he arrived to Ostenda discovering the North Sea. Nobody in his family had ever seen it. He came back home telling them about the endless sea, the waves, the ships, the dunes and the seagulls.

He was the first Belgian champion. After him six more followed: Defraye, Thys, the Buysse brothers Marcel and Lucien, Mottiat, Deman. Now it's Merckx time.

He made his first attempt at the Milano-Sanremo.

A race is like a letter that reveals its secrets after opening. It's dazzling, moving and exciting. It is not like a stone, unchanging over time. It is a surprise!

On 19th March 1946, the rising of Fausto Coppi on the ruins of war had been a revelation. People feared that the time he spent in prison had dried him up. Valetti, Vicini, Sylvere Maes and Vietto would never be what they were before. It was different for Coppi. After the African period, thanks to his honeymoon and the switching to a Bianchi, he was the same as ever.

Having just passed the town of Masone, Coppi left Teisseire behind, with a quick acceleration. He soon went on a breakaway, remaining alone for 151km. At the end he arrived 14' before Teisseire and 18'30" before Ricci, Bartali, Canavesi, Ortelli, Leoni. It had been a tail rather than an enterprise.

That day the journalist Bruno Roghi dedicated his ironical comment to Aldo Zambrini, a short man who had followed Coppi in the team car. «When he got out of the car he was so very tall that he almost touched the heavens. The moment he started running towards the winner of the race, mixing tears of joy and sweat drops, he moaned "ouch!" because one of his hair was caught between the pincers of the constellation of the Scorpion».

You can find beauty in a race. Joining the roll of gold of the Milano-Sanremo is like being at the Louvre, in the midst of the best artworks of the world. The race won by Coppi represents the same brave, cold, sorrowful, and tragic revolution achieved in paintings by the likes of Delacroix, Christophe and Michelangelo. But the race itself can also be mischievous and meticulous like Caravaggio or Vermeer. Otherwise it can be absurd, cruel and hard, as in Bosch, Tiziano and Van Gogh. However it is beautiful, seductive and festive like the works of Giorgione, Mantegna and Renoir. But it is always mysterious like the Hammurabi Code.

Merckx reverently approaches this race. It is not the same race the «first Lion from the Fiandre», Vanhouwaert, run in his times. The route is a bit changed. The bridge of boats on the Po, where the riders had to pay 10 cents to pass, has disappeared. The Colletta of Terralba and the Planes of Ivrea with the tooth of Portigliolo or the ramp of the Doganella- Punta Dell'Aspera are now less difficult. A soft gallery took the place of the so dreaded Capo Torre, a peak on the sea. The ascent of Miramare, the Malpasso of Capo Noli, the climb from the Baia dei Saraceni, the fatal Caprazoppa had been completely abandoned or changed. The road had been adjusted, enlarged and paved. So, the Sanremo race had become a prey for sprinters: Van Steenbergen, Van Looy, Poblet.

That mythic race was slowly dying off due to lack of oxygen. It was now a single blaze: the final sprint. For this reason in 1960 Vincenzo Torriani, who was in charge of the race, added the 'Poggio' to the route 6km away from the finishing line. The Poggio was at an altitude of 162m, an ascent of 3.7km and an average slope of 3.7% (maximum degree 8%). A tooth that hurts after a 280km race!

Milan is the capital of Italian cycling. When Merckx arrived there the city had just been hit by a scandal. The student's magazine of the Liceo Parini, «La Zanzara», had published an inquiry about sex, which was also published by «Le Monde» in France and «The New York Times» in the US. Those students in suits appear as spoiled children while the riders are common people challenging nature not conventions.

Cold is bitter at the start gathering.

It is the fifty-seventh Milano-Sanremo race. At 9.30 a.m. Adriano Rondoni gives the start signal to 190 riders, in Via Ascanio Sforza. What a range of champions! Gimondi and Adorni, respectively the winner and the leader of the last Italian Giro; the Belgian Van Looy, Godefroot, Sels, Reybrouck, Vanspringel, Vannisten and Willy Planckaert; the French Darrigade, Poulidor and Aimar; the German Altig; the Dutch Arie den Hartog (the previous year's winner); the Italians Motta, Bitossi, Dancelli, Durante.

They go along the Naviglio Pavese, among the blossomed almond trees. Merckx passes the wonderful stone arabesque of the Certosa of Pavia. Crossing the Ticino river he looks in admiration at the Ponte Vecchio and the canoeists paddle under its arcades, then he passes over the Po river where sturgeons swim. Far on the top of the hills the castles of Cigognola e Montalto. Oh, it's wonderful riding through the Oltrepò!

Merckx grazes the footprints of Einstein who, as a boy, had walked from Voghera to Genova. Then he borders the hills where Coppi started his flights. The air is cold and Merckx takes a deep breath. In the sky the larks fly over green fields while a lonely buzzard looks at him from a ploughed field. Primroses color the oak woods with yellow lights.

The group of riders moves through the meadows, their wheel spokes shining to the sun. Young men going to the conquest of the world. Joyful young girls smile at them. Experienced old people greet them with bright eyes.

Guido Carlesi, named «Coppino», speeds the race. At the Turchino he takes the lead with 3'50" of advantage on the others. After 80km they catch him again at Albissola and all along the Riviera the team of Molteni pushes first with De Pra and Fornoni, then with Dancelli and De Rosso.

The young Merckx feels comfortable in that journey. He's discovering Saracens towers, palm trees, colored houses and reefs beaten by the sea beats in everlasting conflict. He's watching the world passing in front of him. Suddenly he decides to try the feeling of being at the front of the group. At Capo Berta he counterattacks getting closer to his teammate Poulidor, vigorously chasing him.

Poulidor is almost 30 and he already won the Sanremo race. His iron jaw opens in a knowing smile looking at him, admired. At Santo Stefano al Mare, 17km from the finish line, they hook those leading the race who had accumulated 2'35" advantage. Now Merckx is in the leading group with seventeen more men. The Dutch Zilverberg; the Swiss Maurer; three French (Poulidor, Aimar and Foucher); three Belgians (Vanspringel, Armand De Smet and Lelange); nine Italians (Dancelli, Durante, Balmamion, De Rosso, Carlesi, Poggiali, De Pra Passuello and Andreoli). He goes at breakneck speed scanning the way with feverish eyes.

Riding on the coast, Merckx finds the last elixir in the water bottle.

People are confused, amazed. They look embarrassed at that guy's impudence. But it's just a moment and then they rejoice encircling and swallowing him up. Sanremo whispers his name! That name is like the sound of a scimitar piercing the air. Merckx is a sharp name like a gleaming blade.

It was not a stone thrown from the sling of a boy, a skilled and lucky shot. What Merckx did was a sharp sprint. «A killer sprint» wrote Bruno Raschi.

Over the finishing line Durante starts crying feeling persecuted by bad luck. He's desperate. He will never win the Sanremo race. Merckx's tyranny started there. On the «Gazzetta dello Sport» Raschi wrote: «Eddy Merckx remains a noble and proud winner who doesn't require restrictions of judgment». He reminds people that «Two years ago, he was a prodigious minor, winning the amateur world championship at Sallanches, so his business card boasts safe titles, his genealogy as a champion is above suspicion». He then added: «He's already a complete rider: intelligent, shrewd as a sprinter trained on tracks, well skilled in public relations and – that's for sure – very independent».

These were the times when Magritte was painting *L'Heureux Donateur* (il Donatore felice): a bowler-hatted man, with no face. Inside his figure a crescent moon, a house with lit windows, some trees, the lawn, surrealistic glares... That man is a door into a different dimension for the beholder. That man is Merckx. His Sanremo race is opening a new cycling age.

A bud among the wreckage

17th June 1945

Merckx is the flower blossoming amongst the war wreckage. He was born in Meensel-Kiezegem on 17th June, at 11.45 a.m. 1945. It was a small village in the clay plains of the Flemish Brabant, near hop

and beetroots fields; 20km away from Leuven and 30 from Bruxelles. Meensel and Kiezegem are two rows of houses on two parallel roads.

He is the son of Jenny Pittomvils and Jules Merckx and they live in a small red brick house, at 29 Tieltstraat. The full name is Eduard Louis Joseph Merckx. In those days the king was Leopold III and he used to live in Germany.

The second world war had just ended and it had left deep injuries. It had started on 10th May 1940 with the Fall Gelb (Yellow Case) operation. Hitler had planned to go and conquer France with a blitzkrieg, violating the neutrality of the Netherlands and Belgium.

The winner of the first two Spanish Vuelta cycling race, Gustaaf Deloor (26 years old), had been caught on the very first day. Together with a thousand and two hundred Belgian soldiers, he was at the defense of the «invincible» Eben-Emaele Fortress with 17 bunkers connected by a 5km tunnel. The Germans, however, came from the sky; with their gliders they landed in the middle of the fort and neutralized the cannons using a new kind of explosive. In thirty-one hours they overthrew all resistance. Deloor was brought to Pomerania, at the II B Stalag, in Hammerstein.

While in prison he dreamt to see the smoke of his fireplace once again. When he returned back home he was completely broken, corroded as an old rusty chain. Yet he was still alive. His home had been sacked. He felt like a shipwrecked person in his own place, his dream deflated as a balloon on roses thorns. He lost the love he had felt for the old dearest stones. That unforgettable trauma will make him migrate to New York.

In two days of war, the Rommel's division, the seventh Panzer, had moved more than a hundred km. forward into the woods of the Ardenne region, arriving at Dinant on the Meuse river. On the other frontline, on the 20th of May, Guderian and his Panzers had arrived on the Channel, after having broken through the city of Sedan. With operation Sichelschnitt (Scythe Hit), the Germans wanted to enclose the French, Belgian and British armies in the middle of the Flemish region. During this operation, the English took away with them Julien Vervaecke (the winner of a Roubaix cycling race) because he had opposed the requisition of his bar's furniture to built barricades during the withdrawal of Allied armies. This was his furniture, his work. For about one year, there was no news about him, then his body was found buried in the park of Roncq castle, recognized by his wife who had knitted the jumper he wore with her own hands. The dentist confirmed those were his teeth. Vervaecke, had been executed. He was only 40. His younger brother will be Merckx's mentor.

Another winner of the Roubaix race, Émile Massonjr, imprisoned after two days of war, had passed more than four years in a German camp. Désiré Keteleer, later in the guard of Coppi, escaped the bombing in which his mother lost her life. Célestin Riga had fought the war on an American Sherman tank and, at the time, nobody knew what happened to him, he just disappeared at the age of 23. Even worst the destiny of Lucien Storme who had won the Roubaix race when he was 21. Imprisoned in the Sieburg concentration camp, near Bonn, he lost his life on 10th April 1945, shot dead by the American fire during the liberation of the camp.

Louis Pittomvils, Eddy's uncle, didn't return from the camp either. Merckx's second name was given in his memory. On the other hand, Louis' brother, Petrus, a big man of 100kg, weighted only 38kg at his return and his legs were marked by Gestapo tortures. War annihilates, wounds and divides. When the name Merckx is connected to collaborationism, Eddy will hardly react. He said: «it all started with a drunken brawl in a coffee shop at Meenzel-Kiezegem. There were to sections, the so-called "whites" and "blacks", some cousins of my father were with the blacks. A shot was fired and one of the Merckx was killed. If a Merckx was "balck" the assertion that all the Merckx were "blacks" too is wrong. My parents don't deserve this. My mom helped the "whites" and my dad hid away from the Germans to avoid the concentration camps». Eddy was not involved in that brawl. He was still in his mother's womb, where he remained safe till the end of war. He had been conceived in September 1944, at the end of four years of Nazi occupation. He came to life at home, at peace time. It had been a difficult birth, they had to call the doctor and Eddy will always carry the sign of the forceps on his forehead.

And yet the war had left far deeper wounds. The countryside had been devastated. It was difficult for his farmer grandparents to perk up. The Merckxs and Pittomvils were patriarchal families: one family of eleven children and seven in the other. Their lands neighbored each other, a decisive element in the meeting of Jules and Jenny, Eddy's parents.

Love, you know, is more powerful than war. Jenny, registered as Maria Eustasia Eugenia Pittomvils, had married Jules on 24th April 1943, in the middle of the war, during the occupation of Belgium. It was a rural wedding completely different from those painted by Pieter Bruegel. All around there were SS soldiers and Panzers. Everything was rationed.

Yet Eddy was born free. He spent his first months in the countryside, where everybody works in the open air. His family job consists in cutting the green, reaping, gathering the fruit of the land, taking care of calves and pigs. Life there follows the rhythm of nature even if war destroyed the myth of the *homme champêtre* (the country man). The happy Titiro of the Virgilian *Bucolics* no longer exist.

The father, Jules, is resolute in his decision to leave the fields' hard work. He goes away to look for another job. He goes to Leuven sure that their future is in the city.

Leuven is the capital of beer and culture. Erasmus, Mercator, Vesalius and Jansen had studied or taught there. There are lots of jobs there, they need everything after the war but he feels eradicated. That's not his place. Very early he leaves the job and the city and he goes to Woluwe-Saint-Pierre, a little town in the suburbs of the capital city where there he takes over a grocery.

The Merckx family moves there in August 1946. At the age of one Eddy becomes a citizen of Bruxelles. The square is a place where people meet. The TV has not arrived yet so everybody goes out into the streets. Children run after each other. Teenagers flirt. Men play cards. Women chat. The older ones tell stories. They are all friends and supportive.

Yet it is difficult to start from the beginning again. The father has to rent a room out to support the family, and the little Eddy meets any kind of people in the corridor of his home, any time of day and night. People with their own secrets.

The apartment becomes too small for them when the twin brothers, Michel and Micheline, are born, on 23rd May 1949. But the parents are used to work hard and they succeed. Dad extends the house. Very soon they don't need to rent the room out anymore. The Mercks family flourishes together with the city of Bruxelles and Europe as well.