

the banquet | rossella nisio

short video essay, 3 mins approx.

*the banquet* focuses on one specific photo of the black shirt militia celebrating their return in the fall of 1936. it is part of a photographic album that belonged to domenico lucidi, my maternal grandfather, who volunteered with the militia to fight on behalf of the fascist regime of benito mussolini in the colonial war against ethiopia in 1935-36.

the photo is part of a smaller batch from the album, which comprises eight images from the same day; it was taken by a professional photographer named "g.franci", who was hired by the authorities that organized the event to immortalize the victorious return of the troops (fig. 1, 2, 3).

copies of the pictures from the event were later delivered to the troops. some of them, as it happened with my grandfather for example, became cherished images and were put side by side with the photographs soldiers had taken in africa during the war.



fig. 1 — the veterans marching in perugia.



fig. 2 — festive crowds meet the troops.



fig. 3 — troops and civilians gathered for a speech by the podesta of perugia in piazza iv novembre.

at first i knew nothing about the photographs but what was printed at their back: the name of the photographer and the city where he was based. therefore, i started by doing research on the images: where were they taken? who are the people photographed? what is happening in them? what is the chronological order of the pictures?

the photos seemed all taken in the same occasion, which seemed to be about celebrating the war veterans. similar events from other parts of italy were documented by newsreels and photographs made by state-sponsored istituto luce; by looking at them i could form a clear idea of what kind of circumstances those were.

starting with the photographer's name and location as clues, i could begin to map the events as they took place. i could trace through matching the album photos with street view the route that the celebration parade followed on that day (fig. 4, 5).



fig. 4 — matching the photographs with their location on street view.

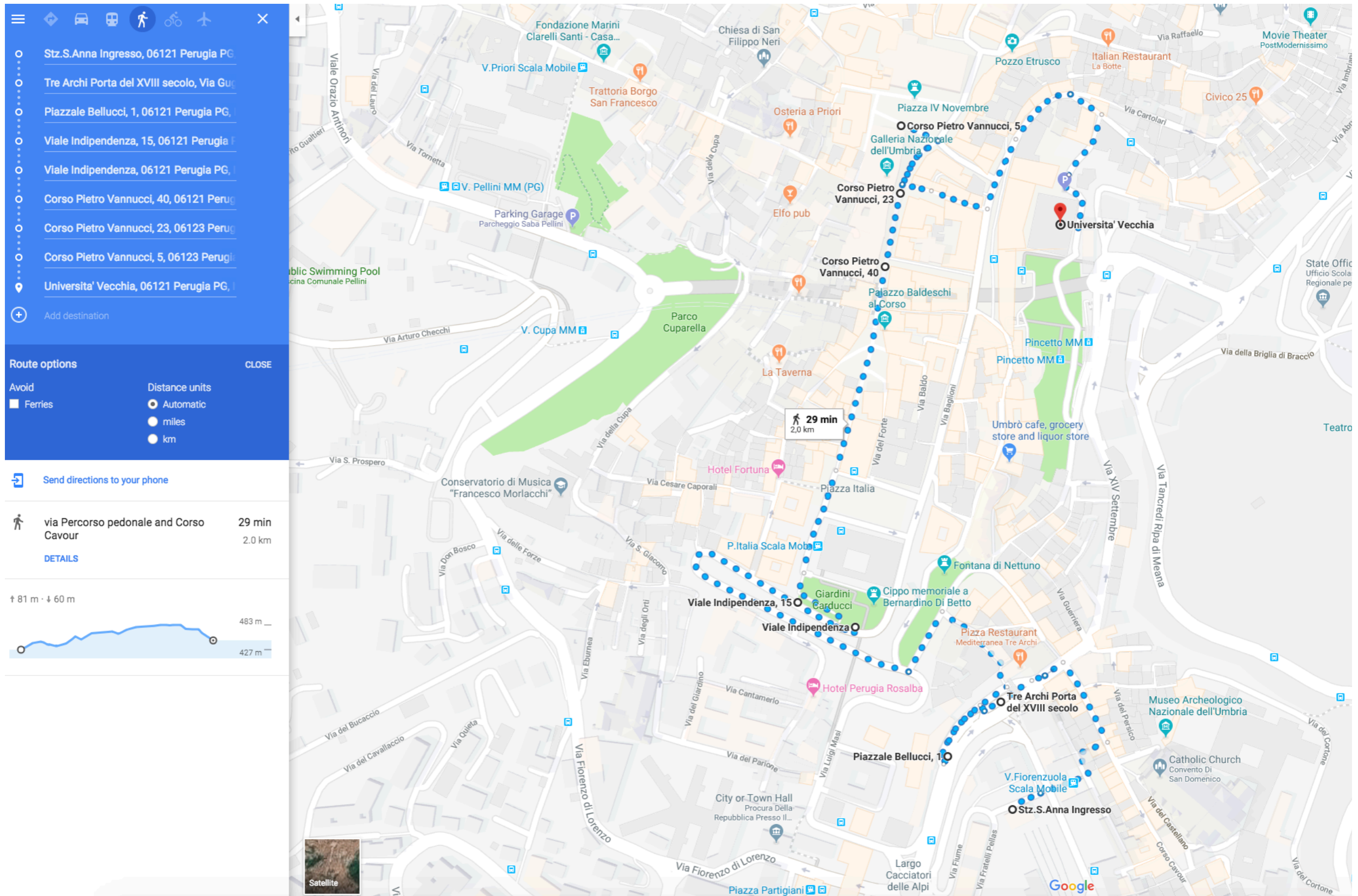


fig. 5 — overview of the route followed by troops as shown in the photographs.



following the route logically, it appeared that the banquet photograph was the last of the batch. the banquet was therefore the moment that concluded the day of celebrations. it was for the soldiers both climax and anticlimax of the day that put a full stop to their colonial adventure.

this last photograph was more problematic to map, because it was taken indoors. i started by researching army barracks, schools and public buildings in the area, but none seemed to match. from structural elements in the architecture of the hall where the banquet took place (the cloister-like shape and the skylight, especially), i could find the actual location of the photo. it is an indoors market sitting at the margins of downtown perugia (fig. 6).

the building underwent renovation in recent years. even though the original structure was partly altered, i could access documentation that showed how it was before its remodeling.





fig. 6 — the “mercato della rupe” as captured during its renovations.

acquired references, together with the original banquet photograph, were used to rebuild a model of the banquet hall, which has an important role in the video work (fig. 7).

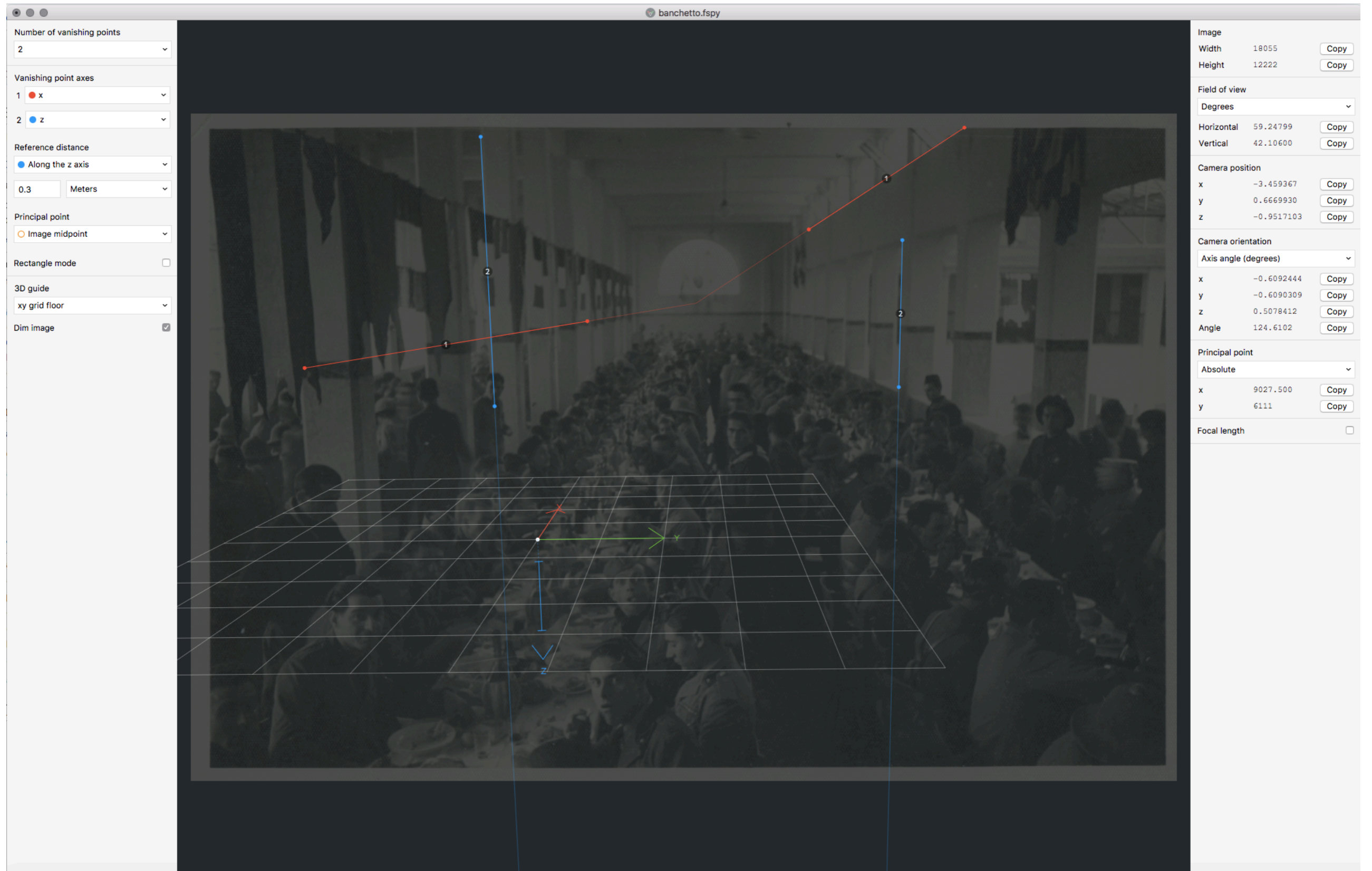


fig. 7 — matching camera view in fspy for blender 3d.

after being aware of all the factual details surrounding the photograph, i started reflecting on its emotional implications. clearly the photo had a strong significance, if it's true that grandfather placed it in the middle of the album rather than at the end, where it belonged chronologically.

the banquet assumed the dimension of the event of a lifetime, to be relived again and again. the banquet hall is therefore a spatial metaphor, of history that pauses one moment to acknowledge the actions of those who fulfilled a specific role at a precise moment in time. but it is also something else, and its meaning coincides with the surface of the photograph itself.

the kind of linear discourse about making history as a consequence of carrying out a violent act, such as waging war to fulfill a long-due imperial "destiny", was frequently heard and seen in fascist propaganda. veterans from the war of 1935-36 trusted this logic, fought to endorse it.

but history didn't work as they wished; in its complexity, it changed course, leaving them to live through their life with an outcome which was other from what they were promised. rather than moving forward, they were trapped: in a way or another they remained bound to the surface of the banquet photo.

the images that end the video are enlargements from the war photographs that make the most of the african album. i selected a few of them and used 3d software to blow them up beyond what naked eye can comfortably see without any aid (fig. 8).

the enlargements, which were made through a highly distorting spherical lens, bring out a sense of grotesque that is easily overlooked by glancing at the diminutive original prints. they also speak of another story from that which is sublimated by the celebrative banquet photograph.



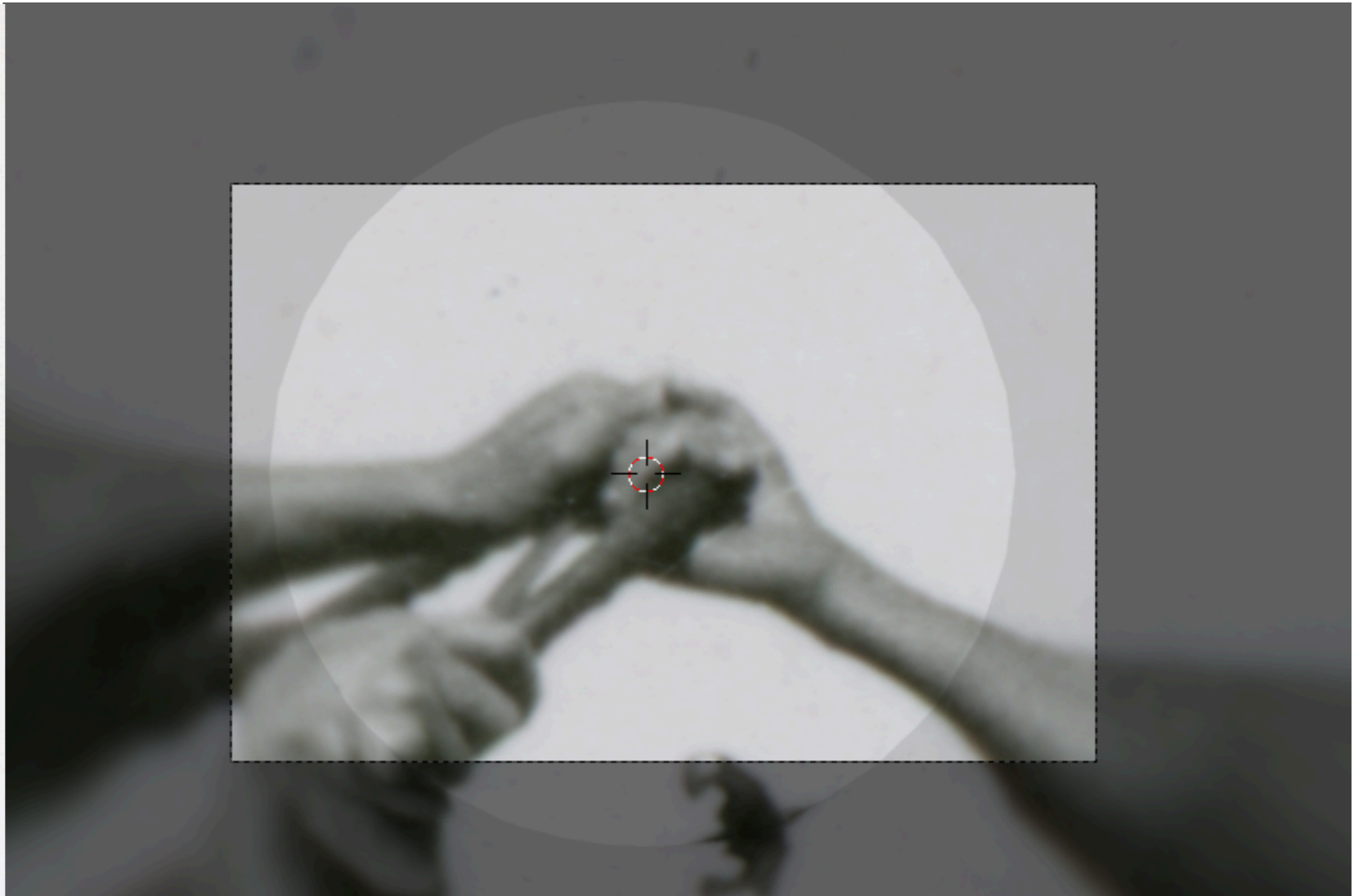


fig. 8 — original photo (sized 5.5 x 4 cm) vs digitally enlarged detail.

