“Frank Serpico” is a finely etched and fascinating documentary. Directed by Antonino D’Ambrosio, it’s a portrait of the legendary Brooklyn-born Italian-American cop who blew the whistle on New York police corruption in the late 60s and early 70s—and, of course, it’s a movie you can hardly watch without comparing it to “Serpico,” the 1973 Sidney Lumet drama, starring Al Pacino in the title role, that became a classic of New Hollywood street grit and moral urgency.

How accurate was “Serpico”? The short answer is: very. It stuck close to the 1973 Peter Maas book, and “Frank Serpico” reveals just how much of Serpico’s story became, through the movie, iconic. As it turns out, the legend and the truth match up nicely.

As you watch “Frank Serpico,” the story comes rushing back, and it now seems all the more amazing, like a Western that really happened. The idealistic uniformed cop of the early 70s who recoiled as the moment they were first offered to him. (Taking money was something he felt allergic to.) The upset hip detective, in his long hair and sandals, who started to live in Greenwich Village—where, as we learn, it took about five minutes for his neighbors to figure out he was a cop. The giant sheepdog. The way that everyone called Frank “Paco.” The police brass who listened sympathetically to his complaints about corruption and did next to nothing. His assignment to the brutal narcotics division in this punishment, where his fellow cops all hated him. And then…his head, in fragments (one piece, he says, later blue. The bullet from that night is still lodged in him). The way that at the time, the entire incident struck him as unremarkable. And so we’re confronted with the slightly surreal image of two wizened colleagues reuniting that night he got shot. (Three months later, the New York magazine cover that launched his fame read, “Portrait of an Honest Cop: Target for an Attack,” with a line that added, “Not everyone was glad it didn’t kill him.”)

The documentary gets Serpico together with Arthur Cesare, one of the two partners who was there that night. Cesare is asked about the fact that a 10-13 (police code for an officer in need of help) was never put out; a question he brushes aside. Cesare claims that police work is so dangerous and haphazard (police code for an officer in need of help) was never put out, a question he is confronted with the slightly surreal image of two wizened colleagues reuniting that night he got shot. (Three months later, the New York magazine cover that launched his fame read, “Portrait of an Honest Cop: Target for an Attack,” with a line that added, “Not everyone was glad it didn’t kill him.”)

The formation of the Knapp Commission, which happened because of Serpico. His testimony before it, after which he disappeared to Europe. (His punishment), where his fellow cops all hated him. And then…his head, in fragments (one piece, he says, later blue. The bullet from that night is still lodged in him). The way that at the time, the entire incident struck him as unremarkable. And so we’re confronted with the slightly surreal image of two wizened colleagues reuniting that night he got shot. (Three months later, the New York magazine cover that launched his fame read, “Portrait of an Honest Cop: Target for an Attack,” with a line that added, “Not everyone was glad it didn’t kill him.”)

Now, he lives in upstate New York in the relative wilds of Columbus County, in a one-room cabin he built with his own hands. Outside, there are Buddhist statues and chickens running around, and he has made a bell out of a nightstick. Where, as we learn, it took about five minutes for his neighbors to figure out he was a cop. The giant sheepdog. The way that everyone called Frank “Paco.” The police brass who listened sympathetically to his complaints about corruption and did next to nothing. His assignment to the brutal narcotics division in this punishment, where his fellow cops all hated him. And then…his head, in fragments (one piece, he says, later blue. The bullet from that night is still lodged in him). The way that at the time, the entire incident struck him as unremarkable. And so we’re confronted with the slightly surreal image of two wizened colleagues reuniting that night he got shot. (Three months later, the New York magazine cover that launched his fame read, “Portrait of an Honest Cop: Target for an Attack,” with a line that added, “Not everyone was glad it didn’t kill him.”)

But that also turned him into an alienated outsider. We see TV-news-magazine clips of Serpico from the 80s, when he led an isolated existence on a farm in Holland. Now, he lives in upstate New York in the relative wilds of Columbus County, in a one-room cabin he built with his own hands. Outside, there are Buddhist statues and chickens running around, and he has made a bell out of a nightstick. Watching “Frank Serpico,” I found myself drifting, over and over, to a different true-life tale of bad apples and whistleblowing: the Harvey Weinstein saga—and, indeed, the whole system of sexual harassment in Hollywood. Serpico, when he began to question how the police were doing things (the kickbacks, the clasping culture of silence), was going up against a system so vast and entrenched that it was thought of, quite simply, as “the way things are.” But as a result of the actions of a handful of courageous women, who stood up to speak the truth, that system, at last, can now begin to come crashing down. Perhaps, of course, will be long; and it is never over. Yet Frank Serpico’s lesson is one that we have to keep re-learning in America— or, more accurately, it’s one that we forget at our peril. As Serpico explains, he became a cop for 45 years (ever since “Serpico”) because people expected him to be a certain person: the hero, the knight who swoops in to rescue them from corruption. And what he tells us isn’t just that he’s not that guy (it’s a role he stumbled into). It’s that the whole problem is that people believe a hero can save them. What they need to look to instead, he says, is themselves.