



Looking Back

By Mary Ann Dailey, PhD, RN

The Fate of Innocents

Infant abandonment and the foundling wheel in 19th-century Italy.

While exploring my family roots in Pacentro, a medieval village in Abruzzo, Italy, I learned that my maternal grandfather had been abandoned by his mother on a doorstep in a piazza. Stigmatized as an infant, my grandfather never shared with his children any information about his childhood, but genealogical research uncovered documents describing how on July 9, 1881, he was found by a police officer and taken to the village midwife, who bathed and swaddled him. Based on the place where he was found, the magistrate named him Leone Gradini (the Lion of the Steps). The following day he was baptized in the local church and taken to a foundling home in the city of Sulmona. Nothing more was known about his parentage.

For centuries, foundling homes, last resorts for unwanted infants like my grandfather, were repositories for secrets and mistakes; but they were also sources of hope and second chances. In Italy, the most renowned foundlings are perhaps the girls of the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, whose fortunes were reversed when 18th-century composer Antonio Vivaldi, hired as their music teacher, turned them into a much-admired all-female ensemble. However, most abandoned children were considered fortunate if they simply survived infancy. And the circumstances that resulted in their abandonment were often intricate and complex.

Nineteenth-century Italy was deeply rooted in tradition, religion, and superstition. Everyone in the area worshiped in the same church, and women shared the services of the same midwife. In such a close-knit community, secrets were few. For the unmarried pregnant woman, this was hostile terrain that presented limited options. She could remain in her family's home and attempt to conceal a pregnancy. But if shunned by her family, she could take refuge at the home of the local midwife until the time of delivery. Either way,

she would most likely give up her baby, as keeping it would forever stigmatize both of them.

In some regions of Italy, several surnames were associated with illegitimacy. These included *Trovato* (from the Italian verb *trovare*, which means “to find” or “come upon”) and *Esposito* (from the Latin *expositum*, meaning “of this place” or literally “being exposed for others to find”). In the village of Pacentro, the surname *Casasanta* (House of Saints) was affixed to the civil birth record of an illegitimate child or a foundling.

While many abandoned children were illegitimate, poor economic conditions also led to the abandonment of legitimate children by parents who were unable to provide for them. For these parents, often the elimination of one mouth assured the survival of the other children.¹

THE EVOLUTION OF FOUNDLING HOMES

In 1198, Pope Innocent III decreed the establishment of church-sponsored foundling homes. Abandoned babies were often left “exposed” on the steps of a church, so they could easily be found and delivered to the church’s care.

The oldest known continuously operating facility specifically designed for the care of abandoned children is the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence. Designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, the architect of the famed Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, and funded and governed by the wealthy silk guild, this refuge for unwanted children remained in continuous operation from 1445 through 1875. Designed in the style of a monastery, the ospedale included administrative offices, a church, a cloistered courtyard, a large kitchen and refectory, dormitories for the older children and servant nurses, and nurseries for the infants.

In 1660 the first *ruota dei proietti* (foundling wheel), designed to maintain the mother’s anonymity,



Behind the metal window grating is the *ruota dei proietti* (foundling wheel) of the Ospedale degli Innocenti (Hospital of the Innocents) in Florence, Italy. On the portico above the window is a bust of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1519–1574). The fresco above the window depicts two cherubs holding a scroll with this Latin inscription from Psalm 26: “*Pater et mater reliquerunt nos, Dominus autem assumpsit*” (Our fathers and mothers have abandoned us, but the Lord has taken us). Photo courtesy of Dr. William Coleman.

was installed at the ospedale. Inspired by similar turnstiles that originated in churches and convents, this updated *ruota* consisted of a box affixed to a wooden wheel. When a baby was placed in the box, the wheel would rotate, bringing it to an internal trapdoor that would allow an attendant inside the building to retrieve it.

In 1804, while under French occupation, Italy came under the mandate of the Napoleonic Code, a set of laws that included guidelines for the care of abandoned children and required the establishment of a foundling wheel in each community. Allowing anonymous infant abandonment was believed to reduce infanticide, preserve the honor of unmarried pregnant women, and free men from the responsibilities of fatherhood. In the 19th century, approximately 35,000 infants were abandoned annually at Italian foundling homes.²

REBIRTH OF THE FOUNDLING WHEEL

Infant abandonment isn't relegated to the past. In 2007, following an increased incidence of infant abandonment in Rome's garbage cans, the Casilino Polyclinic in Rome became one of several hospitals in Europe and the United States to reinstate the foundling wheel. This modern day “wheel” is a heated cradle behind a door, and like its predecessor it allows for anonymous abandonment of an infant. Movement of the cradle initiates an alarm, which allows quick recovery of the infant by hospital personnel.³

Eighteen years of genealogical research yielded nine generations of relatives dating back to 1613, but my family tree doesn't include the lineage of my maternal grandfather. Through the kindness of strangers, he was nourished, loved, grew to manhood, and found a wonderful woman with whom he shared his life. Together, they created a family with over 100 descendants. On July 11, 1961, exactly 80 years and three days after his abandonment, he passed away. This article is dedicated to his memory and to that of countless other foundlings.

For more information on this topic, go to <http://links.lww.com/AJN/A24>. ▼

Mary Ann Dailey is an assistant professor and chairperson of the Department of Nursing at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Contact author: maryanndailey@comcast.net. Looking Back is coordinated by Barbra Mann Wall, PhD, RN, wallbm@nursing.upenn.edu. For submission information, see AJN's author guidelines at <http://ajn.edmgr.com>.

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WET NURSES AND SERVANT NURSES

Nineteenth-century Italian hospitals were essentially charity organizations for the poor and the homeless.¹ Most contained sections dedicated to foundling care.

An unmarried mother whose infant was being cared for at the hospital often faced forced servitude for at least a year. Typically she would serve as an internal wet nurse, feeding a succession of infants, but was often not allowed to nourish her own baby. She would also perform other tasks, such as cleaning the facility and caring for older children. Cross-contamination among the infants and lack of breast cleansing between feedings led to infections among infants and wet nurses. This, coupled with poor sanitation in foundling homes, contributed to high infant mortality rates.¹ It's estimated that half or more of infants died in their first year of life.²

Hospitals also had servant nurses who were often illiterate women or older foundlings who had never been claimed or adopted. Supervised by a nun, these nurses worked long hours but received little compensation.^{3,4}

In addition to internal wet nurses, hospitals frequently recruited lactating mothers with unweaned children or those still producing milk following the death of their own infants as “external wet nurses.” This provided the women with supplemental income while affording the infants a better chance of survival. Since foundling homes were rarely hygienic environments, infants were more likely to survive being cared for by a healthy, robust lactating woman residing in a clean house, preferably in the countryside. External wet nurses received a monthly stipend until the child was weaned (at approximately one year of age in rural areas).³

THE ROLE OF THE MIDWIFE

The role of Italian midwives shifted greatly over time and varied by region. During the Counter-Reformation (or Catholic Revival) of the 16th and 17th centuries, midwives were licensed by the Catholic Church and endorsed by the municipality to deliver babies.⁵

Through episcopal licensing (whereby a bishop grants the license for the performance of baptism) that was instituted during the Counter-Reformation movement, a midwife was permitted to baptize an infant who died shortly after childbirth. By the 18th century, the church required that illiterate midwives undergo intensive oral examinations on the ecclesiastical procedures for baptism. In the Kingdom of Sicily, which encompassed all of present-day Abruzzo and provinces south, a 1749 law required surgeons, midwives, and barbers to perform a cesarian section on a pregnant woman who had died before delivery to allow for the baptism of the fetus and the redemption of its soul.⁶

In 1732 the first school of midwifery was instituted in Turin, and subsequent schools began to appear in other major cities in northern Italy, whereas villages throughout the Italian peninsula relied on the unschooled midwife to provide maternity services. By 1777, obstetrical standards of practice were instituted at the Hospital of the Incurables in Naples.⁵

By the 19th century the midwife, a trusted and respected village elder, became integral to the care of the unmarried pregnant woman and her baby. Often she provided housing, assisted with delivery, and arranged for baptism. Following delivery, she took the newborn to a foundling home, placed it on the *ruota*, and included a donation. For her services she would receive compensation according to the woman's means and the willingness of her family to pay.

The Napoleonic Code mandated that a midwife who assisted with a birth notify the civil official. If an illegitimate infant was born without the assistance of a midwife and abandoned, then the midwife worked with officials to fabricate a story surrounding the birth of a foundling to shield the mother from exposure.

AFTER INFANT ABANDONMENT

Foundling home administrators maintained records for each abandoned child, including admission logs, registers of wet nurses, and placement with foster families. Admission data included the time of arrival,



One of eight glazed terra-cotta tondi depicting infants in swaddling bands, which were set in the spandrels between the arches of the Ospedale degli Innocenti (Hospital of the Innocents) in Florence, Italy. Photo by Adrian Fletcher / www.paradoxplace.com.

sex and estimated age of the infant, place and date of baptism, assessed condition of health, and a description of clothing or other identifiers, such as holy pictures, coins, silk ribbons, and necklaces. These objects would typically be attached to the infant's swaddling clothes in the unlikely event that the mother might reclaim the child.^{1,6,7}

Following assessment, infants were sorted according to their state of health (the frail were isolated from the healthy) and each received a cloth necklace with an engraved metal number corresponding to the admission data. Each infant was also assigned a booklet for pertinent medical notations and a record of compensation for his or her wet nurse. Since compensation was tied to the maintenance of this health log, the wet nurse was a willing data keeper.⁷ Medical care included inoculations for the child along with monthly examinations of both the child and the wet nurse. If the physician suspected abuse or mistreatment, then the infant could be removed and placed with another wet nurse.⁸

Long-term compensation for foundlings varied throughout Italy, but the sex of the child dictated the duration of payment, which was made by the foundling home. In some Italian provinces, a foster family caring for a female foundling could receive payment for up to 12 years, while males were supported for only five or six years. This disparity was most pronounced in Rome, where payment to foster families

extended through age 21 for girls compared with age seven for boys. When compensation for girls extended beyond age seven, the money was held in escrow and used later as dowry.⁹ However, this practice wasn't without its problems. Some men would marry these women simply for their dowries, then soon abandon them and their offspring, thus creating a new generation of foundlings.⁸ ▼

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