

Finding Foundlings

By Jari Chiodo Sinnwell

A genealogist friend of mine was very surprised to learn that her grandfather's surname was not the one he was given at birth. She learned that the original surname, Esposito, was on her grandfather's Italian birth registration. She subsequently discovered her grandfather was an orphan. When he was fostered by local villagers, they gave him their surname. She was told Esposito was one of the surnames used to denote a foundling, a baby who was "exposed" or "abandoned." "What," I wondered, "were the circumstances surrounding his birth?"

I learned that a baby was sometimes abandoned because the parents simply could not afford another mouth to feed. For parents in extremely poor circumstances, the elimination of one mouth to feed helped assure the survival of the other children. Most commonly though, foundlings were the result of illegitimate births. Social and political policies made it difficult or impossible for an unmarried woman to keep and raise an illegitimate child. Not only did the situation shame her, but also shamed her family.

Initially, the primary way to "deal" with these unwanted babies was to leave them alongside the road, abandon them in a remote area, or throw them into the sea. As infanticide reached an all-time high, the Catholic Church became increasingly alarmed. The church's concern for these babies' souls played a large role in the formation of foundling homes. These homes presented another more compassionate option for unwed mothers. A system was developed whereby the mother could leave her baby at a church or hospital anonymously. In doing so, she and her family were spared disgrace. Thus the *ruota dei proietta* or "foundling wheel" was instituted.



The foundling wheel was installed into the outer wall of a church or hospital. In smaller villages, a small door was located in the wall of the home of the midwife. The baby was placed in a small wooden box, then the wheel was turned to carry the baby inside. No one inside could see who placed the baby in the wheel. A strategically placed bell alerted those inside of a new arrival. The attendants were responsible to find a woman to nurse the baby, take the baby to the church to be baptized, and to register the birth at the town hall. Normal birth registrations included the names and occupations of the parents and there was no description of the baby besides its gender. However, when a foundling birth was registered, most commonly it would read, *parenti ignoti* (unknown parents), in place of the parents names. Some sort of physical description or a word or two describing the place or physical condition of the foundling's discovery might be included.



parenti ignoti

Often the mothers of foundlings would place a half piece of cloth or half of a picture in with the baby and retain the other half. This was done in the hope that someday, her living conditions would improve and she could reclaim her child. In that case, she would appear at the church or hospital, give them the date of birth and present the half piece of cloth or picture she had retained. Upon a proven match, she would be given the child.

Sadly, many foundlings were given surnames that reflected their disgraced status making them outcasts in their villages. It eventually became illegal to give a foundling a name that carried a stigma. After the law changed, they were commonly given names that reflected a physical characteristic or a circumstance surrounding their discovery.

Here are examples of the names given to foundlings:

Esposito/Esposito = "exposed" or "abandoned"

Trovato = "found"

D'Angelo = "of an angel"

Bruno = "dark-skinned" or "dark haired"

Di Maggio = "May" (month of birth)

Innocenti = "innocent one"

Fortuna = "luck"

Proietto/Proietta = "thrown away" or "cast off"

Di Salerno = Location name

Di Giorno = "Morning" (time of discovery)

Many of these surnames exist today and their bearers have no idea that somewhere in their ancestry there is a foundling child.