



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

«I was sick...»

Institutes for minors with psycho-physical ailments

(Part III)

**«REGIONAL CENTRE FOR PHYSICAL REHABILITATION»
AT ROVERETO (TN)**

Rovereto is an important tourist and cultural centre of the Trentino region with about 40,000 inhabitants; it is located 25 km away from Lake Garda and is surrounded by winter sports resorts and summer hiking. In Roman times the name of the place was *Roboretum* (oaks' forest); in fact, this type of tree abounds in the valley and it is the emblem of the municipal coat of arms. It is the birth-place of the philosopher and Blessed Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855), and it is also known as the 'city of peace' due to the famous bell of the fallen in the battle which every evening, at 8.30, p.m., strikes one hundred times to invoke peace and solidarity among all peoples of the world¹.

¹ The bell «Maria dolens» (its Christian name) was fused in 1924 with the bronze of the cannons used by the 19 nations who took part in the first world war; it is 3.36 mts high and weighs 226.39 quintals. The sound did not match with the expectations, so in 1939 it was fused again; it was fused for the third time due to a severe cracking and it was blessed in 1965 by Paul VI, today Blessed. Every year, in May, there takes place the «Convention of the boys at the Bell» involving the pupils of the primary and the middle schools of the Trentino and other schools who give their contribution through drawings and essays upon the issue of peace and brotherhood.

In the second half of the 19th century, in Rovereto, at via N. Tommaseo 3, the first important «Regional Centre for Physical Rehabilitation» of those suffering from spastic and dyskinetic limb impairments of the developmental age was established². It was the idea of Dr Giuliano Sartori, the neurologist and the chief physician of the civil hospital (1923-2004), who years before used to look after the children suffering from these diseases and passionately studied new therapies practiced in England, America and even in Italy. The building, property of the male orphanage, administered by ECA (Municipal Entity for Assistance), from 1926 to 1955 was used as a school, therefore, after the restoration and adaptation works, thanks to the contributions of ACIS (High Commission of Hygiene and Health), on 5 October 1957 the President, Knight Vittorio Rocchetti inaugurates officially the Centre³.

The Institution has three floors: the ground floor used for general services: the main office, the first-aid service for out-patients, the caretaker's lodging, the apartment for the sisters, the chapel, the laundry and the linen room; the first floor included the living area where the children live during the day: halls for collective and individual occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech therapy, classrooms, hallways used as sitting-rooms, refectory and auxiliary kitchen⁴; on the second floor there were the dormitories, the bathrooms and isolated rooms for the children in quarantine. The centre can accommodate around 50 boys and girls from 5 to 14 years. The aim of the work was to recover to social life children suffering from infant spastic cerebral paralysis who are unable to provide for themselves due to their limb and speech impairments.

Our sisters did not have an easy life. In July 1956 the President of ECA, N. D. Toffetti, writes to the provincial superior of Trento, Sr. M. Teresa Canali, asking for three sisters, one of whom as a

² Currently the structure houses the offices of the social service Centre.

³ cf. «Inauguration speech» in the diary of the community 1957-1962, a unique and important reference text.

⁴ The Centre avails itself of the general services of the hospital on which it depends, but it is organized and equipped in a self-sufficient way for a certain time, if necessary.

superior, in order to guarantee «the good organization of the Centre, as well as the educational-moral orientation» of the inmates, in virtue of the long-standing tradition of collaboration of the Entity with our Congregation, and the connection between the New Centre and the Civil Hospital where the Sisters of Maria Bambina have been working since August 1884⁵. On behalf of the Superior General, Mother Angiolina Reali, the provincial superior, on 13 August 1956, answers affirmatively stating: «I rejoice at the thought that the Lord desires my sisters to carry out a mission of charity and motherly bounty in this new working field, and I pray God that they may correspond fully to the common expectations for the benefit of the little ones and the suffering».

In **May 1957** the work was started by three sisters,⁶ who juridically belonged to the community of the Civil Hospital; the Centre started functioning in the following June.

Superior General, Mother Costantina Balducci, after a short visit *in loco*, expresses some reservations regarding the possibility of keeping up such service due to several and well-founded reasons: the sisters are far away from the community to which they belong and are unable to accomplish the duties prescribed by the *Rule of Life*; being small in number they cannot form an autonomous community; the continual assistance to the children does not allow them to have time for the ‘daily prayers’; the shortage of religious personnel does not consent to send other sisters⁷. Right away, on 6 September 1957, the President Vittorio Rocchetti writes to Mother

⁵ cf. Correspondence, letter of 12.7.1956, prot. n. 2287/31; subject: request sisters for the dyskinetic centre in AGSdC, 648/C.

⁶ Sr. Marina Degiorgio, Sr. Aurelia Berloffo, Sr.v Agnese Martinelli, cf. Statistical Data of the Community, 1957.

⁷ cf. Various Documents, Promemoria, in AGSdC, 648/C.

that at the Centre the presence of the sisters is indispensable as they approach these infirm persons with motherly love and total dedication. After two months (September-November) of correspondence, by return of post in order to settle the terms of working relationships and with the community of the Civil Hospital⁸, after further discernment carried out by the major superiors, the sisters were assured to continue their work at the Centre.

On 1st October 1958 the three sisters constitute an autonomous community until 1970⁹ with Sr. Marina Degiorgio as superior who ensures the Assistant General that she is fine at the Centre for recoverable dyskinetic, where fifty children are «in need of a pitiful hand that replaces their mothers in order to help them, to understand them and at times to make them even smile»¹⁰.

The regulations of the Centre, in Article 13 specifies in detail the typical duties of the superior: she is in-charge of the direct assistance to the hospitalized children; she is to inform the doctor about every circumstance noted regarding the guests; she is to suggest to the Medical Director of the Centre the rosters of the nursing and general staff and the modalities of its implementation; she is to supervise the activities of the physical rehabilitation carried out by occupational therapists and Kinesiotherapists, taking care of their rapport with all the others; she is to direct the initiatives regarding the general and moral education of the hospitalized patients; she is to maintain direct relationships with the superintendent treasurer of the Civil Hospital regarding the supply of food-stuffs and

⁸ 8.9.1957 the superior of the civil hospital, Sr. Giulia Cristoforetti, writes to mother; 16.9.1957 the provincial superior of Trento, Sr. M. Teresa Canali, writes to Mother as well; 15.10.1957 the President V. Rocchetti asks Mother for an appointment; 17.10.1957 the superior general replies; 29.10.1957 the assistant general, Sr. Zaveria Bertulesi, assures that the sisters will continue their service; 5.11.1957 the president addresses his thanks. Cf. Correspondence, in AGSdC, 648/C.

⁹ From 1970 to 1972 the religious nucleus depend directly upon the Provincial Superior of Trento; from 1st November 1972 to 15 November 1974 it becomes once again an off-shoot of the community of the hospital.

¹⁰ Correspondence, Letter of 20.11.1958, in AGSdC, 648/C.

the necessary material; she is to report directly to the Administrative Director of any dysfunction or shortages encountered in the various services; she is to keep updated the administrative documentation and accounting. Considering the number and the quality of these commitments, the superior was the person responsible for all the internal organization of the Centre but, wisely enough, the same article concludes: «For the fulfilment of these duties the superior relies upon the work of the other sisters engaged at the Centre who depend on her»¹¹. The main duty of the sister is to supervise the sick children, dealing with relatives, ...teaching catechism, with particular care for the children preparing themselves for the First Communion; for this specific service the sister can make use of movies, recordings of sacred history, wall charts. Among the most important feast days, besides Christmas, Easter, the solemnity of Maria Bambina, the feast of St Lucia, they used to celebrate the Children's Day 'of true joy', namely the day of the First Holy Communion.

The active and wise cooperation among all the staff ensures that life at the Centre is carried on in a familiar and serene atmosphere, which renders bearable for the children their being away from family and profitable for their rehabilitation, also because most of them have normal intelligence, sometimes also outstanding. The sisters were also in charge of the relations with external authorities: the regional doctor, the health officer, other doctors who care for young patients, as well as the frequent and continuous contacts with family members which are good and based on mutual understanding.

The treatment of the patients is set on two levels, equally important: physiotherapy and occupational therapy. The first one is strictly individual and is studied and practiced by specialized physiotherapist and by the neurologist; they analyse the individual case to eliminate the pathological cause; the second, individually

¹¹ cf. Regulations of the Regional Centre for Physical Rehabilitation for limb impairments spastic and dyskinetic (signed by the general secretary and by the president with illegible handwriting). Various documents in AGSdC, 648/C.

or in groups, with the help of special equipment, intends to make the child able to meet the needs of practical life.

The method adopted¹² is the «Grisoni Colli»¹³ which is a treatment of global stimulation through the coordination of specific contributions of the therapists and with an additional finalized activity to be carried out by the mother directly involved, and the «Bobath» proposal which is based on sensory experiences, hence no verbal orders are given to the patient, but just motional information.

Very important and effective are also the «synthesis sessions»¹⁴ presided by the Director, for one hour per week. They consist of conversations including exchange of view and working orientation carried out among the physiotherapists, teachers and the sister directress. The anomalies and the possible recovery of every child are taken into consideration and examined; the objections and the proposals put forward are matters of discernment by the Director, the paediatrician and the psychologist, and are put into action in the ambit of the therapy or of the school or of the general discipline.

Therefore, health care is very demanding, in fact, the ratio between staff and inmates is one to four, and the average of the patients is about 46/48 children every day.

Even amid so much and delicate work, the sisters, in a simple but moving way, thus express themselves: «We three of us consider it an immense grace to have been chosen among ten thousand of our sisters to assist directly these suffering brethren. How much good could be done also in this field! What would they do without a good word, an encouragement, an affectionate reproach, perhaps, a prompt forgiveness? It is true that it takes a lot of patience, but the Lord does never deny to us this holy virtue, if we apply it for

¹² Diary of the community, 1964.

¹³ Adelaide Grisoni Colli (1939-1989), member of the first historical nucleus of neurology of the Neurological Institute C. Besta di Milano, 'invented' the infantile neuropsychiatry at the Institute giving priority to the rehabilitation of the child with neurolesions. She used to say: «The child with neurolesions is a fire to be kindled, not a vessel to be loaded».

¹⁴ Diary of the community, 1957-1962, p. 24.

the good of the persons dear to His heart: the poor and our dear dyskinetic children...»¹⁵.

In the course of the year the children can also attend school: teaching is personalised and is taught by teachers assigned by the Superintendent of Education. They are also orientated to manual labour: the girls learn sewing, knitting, embroidery... of course doing samplers, but being of great use at a therapy level; the boys make wood or cardboard cuttings, constructions, drawings etc.: a reason of joy for the children and of comfort for the parents when they see the handicraft of their children during the annual exhibition which for them are always wonderful.

Their day-to-day timetable is:

7.00	getting up, tidying up, breakfast
9.00-11.00	physiotherapy or school (two shifts)
11.30	lunch
12.30-14.30	rest
15.00-18.00	occupational therapy or school
18.00	supper
19.00	recreation
20.00	prayer, rest

For those who can, some short trips by bus in the surroundings of Rovereto or tricycle ride and go-carts along the Tommaseo street or in the garden are also available. On Sundays and feast days relatives can visit them and, if they wish, they are allowed to leave the Institution from 9.00 to 17.30; at Christmas and Easter holidays they can visit the family and in the months of July-August they can go for summer holidays for a period of thirty days.

Their tenacious will to win the illness that afflicts them, the joy for any little progress made, the immense desire to be like the other children are expressions which move and urges us to do all

¹⁵ Diary of the community, 1957-1962, p. 32.

the possible to help them and to nurture their hope. Sometimes, unfortunately, it is easy to see and perceive in some of them a state of distress and almost despair; this aspect arises in those who assist them the deep and mysterious problem of human suffering, especially in the innocent. «In life everything is in unison», Don C. Gnocchi used to say; yet, we all welcome the sharing of the good things, the positive and of the good results, but we instinctively reject the negative solidarity... Outbursts of joy is irrepressible and gratitude to God and to those who devote themselves to these helpless and suffering children has no limits, when we acknowledge the «miracles of love». Maria Egidia, an eleven-year-old girl, struck in the legs, after a long treatment was able to walk without support; Tommaso, nine years old, unable to walk, to sit, to put his hands in his mouth, to speak in an understandable way, yet with an intelligence above normal, was discharged at thirteen years old and now he walks without support, sits normally, eats on his own and speaks in a way that can be understood. Many are the recovering cases, it is true, however, if the mental faculties are rather short and the child finds hard to cooperate, the result of the therapy is not effective, the child cannot stay at the Centre and is sent to another appropriate Institute¹⁶.

In November 1962 rumours spread about a future new Centre, for children and youth affected by Dyskinesia, in the vicinity of the new civil hospital, capable of 120 guests: 60 for children, boys and girls from 5 to 12 years and 60 for young persons from 12 to 18 years. The news-hypothesis had no result¹⁷.

The community of the Centre, at Tommaseo Street, continues peacefully its activity until 1965 comforted by a few visits of the provincial superior, Sr. M. Teresa Canali, who calls it «my little Bethany»¹⁸. Later on, the difficulty of conducting the small group of sisters emerges again: from 1966 to 1970 they become directly

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Diary of the community, 1962.

¹⁸ Diary of the community, 1965.

dependent on the Provincial Superior of Trento, Sr. Marina Corradini, and the Superior Sr. Aurelia Berloffia, who completed her term of mandate (1964-1970), but remains at the Centre as directress; on 1st November 1972, the provincial superior, for the reasons already mentioned, had the *nulla osta* by the bishop, Mgr Alessandro Maria Gottardi¹⁹, and she proceeded to the suppression of the community consisting of only two sisters who joined again the community of the hospital.

On **15 November 1974** our apostolic service at the Regional Centre of re-education, comes to an end²⁰; from August of the same year the service had already been limited only to out-patients. Sr. Aurelia B. and Sr. Agnese M. definitively leave the apostolic work which they had started and conducted for seventeen years with great sacrifice, real enthusiasm and lots of love for the many neuropathic children.

Sr. Aurelia was transferred to «Casa D'Anna» at Telve (TN) and Sr. Agnese went to the community of the civil hospital as a registered nurse²¹.

For those working full-time, unpretentious, with faith and humility in the vineyard of the Lord, remains true, at an existential level, what we read in the Gospel of *Luke* (17:10): «When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, we are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!». But it is equally true that Jesus himself, the servant par excellence, declares blessed the faithful and vigilant servants, «Truly I tell you, He will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and He will come and serve them» (*Lk* 12:37). All enjoyed great peace because, both the personal history and that of humanity, is punctuated by the faithful and provident love of God the Father.

¹⁹ Correspondence, letter of 21 and 23 October and of 7 November 1972, in AGSdC, 648/C.

²⁰ Correspondence, letter of 12 August 1974 (prot. n. 51/74) of the Provincial Superior of Trento, Sr. Giovanna Brambilla.

²¹ cf. Diary of the community of the hospital, 1974.