



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

«I was hungry...»

Meals for the poor (*Part II*)

TRENTO: 1907-1955

In July 1906 in Garzetti Square, Trento, «E.C.A.» opened a cheap meal service centre for the poor of the city and neighbouring country towns (Povo, Lavis, Sopramonte etc.). For a year it was run by lay personnel, after which Sir Giuseppe Bertoldi, chairman of the Managing Committee, thought it advisable to ask the collaboration of the sisters of charity of Lovere. Mother Angela Ghezzi, superior general, agreed to it, and on 1 July 1907, with the approval of prince-bishop Celestino Endrici, the new activity was started by two sisters: Sr. Valeria Lazzari and Sr. Erminia Endrizzi with *sorella mandataria* Maria Perezoli. They were members of the minor seminary community till 1911, then of provincial house till 1920.

Those were crucial years of intense activity. In 1914, when many troops of recalled service-men passed through Trento on their way to the Russian frontier, the meal service succeeded in feeding up to *1,500/2,000 people a day* (PREVEDELLO A., II, 1935, pp. 597-598).

When the war was over, labourers and very many poor people begged to have an evening meal as well, and so the sisters were constituted into a separate community and they stayed for the night at the same building.

In 1942, following upon the first heavy bombardment on the city (2 September), which had hit one of the poorest districts, *about 3,000* poor homeless people a day turned up for their meal, midday and evening, holding ration tickets distributed by the «E.C.A.».

Relations between Trento Municipal authorities and, on their behalf, between the supervising committee of the meal service and the Institute of the sisters of charity were regulated along an Agreement that laid down the commitments of the Committee on the one hand and the sisters' duties on the other. These were expected:

- to cook the food in time for lunch along instructions given on the menu in the best way possible, and to serve it at the fixed time through a small window or counter;
- to clean and put in order the place and keep furniture and utensils in order;
- to check the weight and good quality of foodstuffs given out by suppliers;
- to provide vegetables for the day and make sure that foodstuffs are safely kept in the pantry;
- to keep to the right amount of foodstuffs to cook so as to avoid much waste;
- to check the ration cards given in against the money drawn from them and do the bookkeeping regularly day by day, recording details of income and expenditure in the proper register¹.

Everything was done in accordance with a drawn-up Agreement. A government policeman ensure every day to order and discipline at the refectory and in the surroundings of the house.

The full meal cost 80 lire, but most of the people who availed themselves of the service were quite satisfied with *pastasciutta* (30 lire) and pulses (20 lire) or else soup (0.5 litres portion for 20 lire) and cheese or ham or, occasionally, *frattaglie* (25 lire); bread cost 15 lire, but most people brought it with them.

An *average of 500 persons per day* were served. In 1949 the Centre served 166,433 soup portions, 10,988 *pastasciutte*; 169,374

¹ Agreement dated 1st July 1907 signed by superior general Sr. M.A. Ghezzi and chairman Luigi Prunea, in AGSdC, 238/T.

pulses dishes, 29,789 cheese or ham dishes. From recorded details it appears that the clients, at lunch or at dinner, took soup or pulses dishes. That same year «E.C.A.» distributed 134,969 ration tickets.

At 12.15 and 18.30 a crowd of clients used to gather in Garzetti Square; the Centre had a capacity of 120 seats; meals were served on long tables with a marble surface, in bowls and plates of aluminium, chromium-plated forks and spoons.

Though they knew their clients, the sisters had to take the precaution of marking their own cutlery, pots and pans («Il Gazzettino», *Cucina popolare*, Trento 1950).

Later on, meals were distributed at two levels: on the ground floor poor people and labourers were served. On the upper floor there was a separate service for personnel who paid for their meals, though at lower prices compared to other restaurants. Their fees made it possible to reach a greater number of poor people («Il Gazzettino», *La cucina popolare di Piazza Garzetti*, Trento, 16 aprile 1952).

From 1951 onwards, adjoining the kitchen, there was a building with public bathrooms, where the sisters were in charge and supervised the cleaning of the place. A new name was given to the building: *Il Ristoratore e i bagni popolari*; a second Agreement was drawn up and signed by superior general Sr. Angiolina Reali and the chairwoman Giuseppina Bassetti on 31 July 1952.

In the years 1951-1952 meals served were as seen below:

NUMBER OF MEALS SERVED IN 1951-1952		
	1951	1952 up to September
paid-for meals	54,871	32,936
meals with concession tickets	25,543	22,502

Average of persons served per day: 500. Every year, on Christmas day and Easter, a full special meal was served for free to about 400 poor people of the city, in the presence of Civil Authorities of the city.

The *public bathrooms* comprised 7 bathtubs and 9 showers for men, 6 bathtubs and 2 showers for women; they were open every

day except on Mondays. The fixed price for use of bathtub was 110 lire and for a shower, 80 lire. The greater use of public baths for years 1951-1952 indicates an increasing concern about personal hygiene («Alto Adige», Trento, 18 November 1952).

On 13 August 1955, «given the shortage of religious on duty»², the sisters withdrew from that service after a long, difficult service of charity... which they had done with praiseworthy concern and watchfulness» – wrote the reporter G. G. in an article published in «L'Adige» (13 November 1955) – towards elderly, wandering tramps, internees, refugees, homeless, or certain people who had practically become outcasts of society but turned to the sisters to pour their troubles to.

USE OF PUBLIC BATHROOMS IN 1951-1952

	1951	1952 up to September
baths in bath-tubs	3,566	6,280
showers	3,923	7,453

FAGAGNA: 1914-1941

Fagagna, whose name (*faggio=beech-tree*) takes us back to the time when it was still forest-land, was then a small country-town on the morainic hills of Friuli, a region which was badly affected by migratory waves caused by the economic depression and by various war-time circumstances. Large numbers of unem-

² Registered letter of superior general A. Reali dated 13 August 1955 to the mayor of Trento and that of 19 September 1955 to the chairwoman.

ployed people, farmers, building workers, craftsmen and factory workers were compelled to emigrate: the first wave of them to Bavaria, Australia and Croatia, the second wave to Belgium and France, and later, to Canada and USA.

Long hours of work, home-sickness, undernourishment, lodging in unsafe buildings, were endured provided they could earn a living and support their families in their home Country (TOMAT T., 2004). On 11 November 1914 the *Congregazione di carità* started the cheap meal service at Fagagna, for the poor, and entrusted it to the sisters of Maria Bambina of *Casa della gioventù*; their three cauldrons could contain a total of 240 litres.

The sisters were already running a nursery school (1912); in 1915 they opened an elementary school, *oratorio* for boys and for girls on feastdays, classes of lacework, sewing and toy-making on week-days; all these activities were of great comfort and help to the population living in great distress (PREVEDELLO A., II, 1935, p. 722).

At the youth centre 300 poor people were daily served lunch; 450 boys and girls went to the *oratorio*; 250 children to the nursery school and 180 pupils to the elementary school³.

In 1918, during the Austro-Hungarian invasion, the sisters had to leave the town; the youth Centre was converted into a food-stuffs store⁴; when the war was over they returned and with the young lady Noemi Nigris they re-opened the youth centre and resumed all its activity.

In 1954 the benefactress, friend and collaborator of the sisters, N. Nigris died, leaving behind her the fruits of her total self-dedication and bequeathing her own house to the sisters, with the commitment to continue their educational activity for the benefit of children and young girls and boys of Fagagna.

The cheap meal service was then annexed to the nursery and elementary school (still functioning), which in time gained in impor-

³ Taken from the diary of the apostolic community of Fagagna in AGSdC, Fagagna «Casa Nigris».

⁴ cf. Fagagna «Casa della Gioventù», celebration of 25 years of fondation 1911-1936 in AGSdC, Fagagna «Casa Nigris».

tance and relevance. Of the meal service, instead, there remain no written records on the cooking and distribution of the food nor even of Agreements between the managing Body and the Institute.

VENICE: 1917-1944

The charitable initiative of the cheap meal service of Venice was also of particular interest and social relevance during the war, so much so that 18 centres were suitably opened at various points of the city.

There still remain memories of the cheap meal service situated at *San Lorenzo*, close to the Home for Beggars, and of *San Giovanni Evangelista* a short distance past the school of the same name, beyond the *Archivio di Stato*. Here, the sisters of Maria Bambina cooked and distributed the meals from 1917 to 1944.

Meals were served from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. to an *average of 250-400 per day* to people including men and women of all social ranks. In fact, besides the poor, clients included people belonging to the lower middle class (aged pensioners, ordinary employees), persons whose fixed earnings were no longer sufficient to make ends meet and maintain their families, mostly numerous. Meals were generally provided for free or, at any rate, at a reasonable price for those who did pay for it.

As there was no proper hall with seats available, some people, even among the homeless, went away as soon as they were served, others sat down where they could outside, in the *calli*, while still others carried it home to eat it with their family (PREVEDELLO A., V, 1940, pp. 164-166).

The four sisters engaged in this hard work, day after day, rendered (unpaid) voluntary service during the war and its aftermath.

Later on, in 1932, Sr. Ernesta Gallotti, provincial superior, wrote to the *presidente commendatore* Giovanni Zardinoni, proposing to have a simple agreement to regularize terms of service between the managing body and the Congregation⁵.

In official records there is no trace of the Agreement, but there still exists, handwritten or typed, correspondence between the representative of the Institute (local or provincial superior) and the chairperson of the Charitable Body.

On their part, the sisters did their best to keep the place respectably clean and tidy and to maintain happy relations with the people who availed themselves of the cheap meal service. To the sisters these were not simply 'clients' but above all dear friends. So they discussed the problem of space and organization with their provincial superior, who did not hesitate to write to eminent persons in authority such as his eminence Pietro La Fontaine, cardinal Patriarch of Venice, count Gianni Bianchetti, prefect of Venice, and the chairman of the Managing Body. In particular, she solicited the purchase of a certain house called «Casa Zennaro»⁶.

The clear, direct style that she kept up in all three letters sounded more or less like this: *Cucina Popolare S. Giovanni Evangelista* is a highly beneficial initiative of the city, particularly at the present moment when not only the poor but also families who once were well-to-do must now hold out their hand and beg a pitiable aid at the kitchen window. The kitchen daily provides for 500 to 600 meals in winter time, from 200 to 300 in summer, but could handle an even greater activity if it had a greater capacity. There must be some way of enabling it to function smoothly along practical requirements conforming to its charitable aims and purposes, worthy of the traditions of Venice.

The room available is of the poorest kind: the kitchen has an air-hole on top, creating a troublesome concentrated vapour, and causing trouble and diseases; at the kitchen window at which the

⁵ Correspondence, letters dated 3 January, 4 March, 12 March 1932, in AGSdC, 232/P.

⁶ Letters dated 28 March, 1st June, 2 June 1933, in AGSdC, 232/P.

food is given out there is the draught created by the street-door opposite, and the room for the meal of the poor is in a miserable state... In a locality that is free and secluded, which is a valuable asset for a public kitchen, there is a small house which looks ideal also because it would allow for the possibility of building a proper hall for those among the poor, and there are many of them, for whom the meal they eat is the only food they eat for the day. Besides, being quite close to our provincial house, it would make it easier to have more helping hands for it...»⁷.

However, in spite of the appraisal of the building on the part of the managing council⁸, the request was turned down by the prefecture of Venice by notification dated 20 August 1933, because the sale of the house had already been transacted by another purchaser «at a prohibitively exorbitant price»⁹.

Five years later the Managing Body had another person at its head: on 24 October 1939 the chairman, Andrea Benzoni, officially informed the superior, Sr. Assunta Ambrosetti: «By Royal Decree dated 22 May 1939, recorded at the Court of the Counts on 7 September, and made known to the cheap meal service committee on 17 October, this P. O. has been taken up by the E.C.A. and by order of the delegate of the Mayor the handing over must be done by the end of this month» (Prot. No. 145).

The sisters continued to work at the same «wretched» place till 1944 when the Republican Fascist Party of Venice, mindful of the service carried out by the sisters, informed the provincial supe-

⁷ Letter dated 28 March 1933 of the superior Sr. E. Galloni to the patriarch of Venice P. La Fontaine.

⁸ Letter of chairman, dated 23 June 1933, n. 217.

⁹ Letter from the prefecture of Venice div. 2° B, n. 15126. Subject: proposal of purchase of house for cheap meals service.

rior that a *ristoratore economico* was to be set up at Cannaregio in Rio Terrà Barba Fruttarol, and so he asked to have the service of sisters for that centre as well¹⁰. The provincial superior Sr. Assunta Ambrosetti thanked the chairman of the Fascists for his trust and appreciation of the activity carried out by the sisters over a period of 27 years, but said: «... I am grieved to inform you that the new centre is too far from our community and hence the sisters would find it too difficult to abide by the Rules; I am therefore unable to meet your request...» (Letter dated 6 February 1944).

CONCLUSION

This slight glimpse into the history of our service of charity was something new even for us, sisters of Maria Bambina. Thanks to the opportunity that offered itself to us, it has today unexpectedly re-emerged, from documentary evidence jealously preserved in the archives of the Generalate of the Institute. If, in spite of the diversity of surface features, there emerges from this account a certain uniform quality throughout, it indicates something solid and constant: the Institute's care to meet real needs of times and places, the sisters' self-availability and spirit of self-sacrifice, their passionate love for humanity in distress and in poverty.

As we reflect on a distant past, humanity as it is «today» still poses a challenge: in the mosaic of our history there have been very many forms of charity ever active in social ambits proposed by the Church, by committed laypersons and by religious Institutes.

¹⁰ Letter dated 2 February, Prot. n. 18/44.