



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

«I was sick...»

Institutes for minors with psycho-physical ailments

(Part II)

THE MEDICAL-PEDAGOGICAL INSTITUTE «VILLAA. PANCRAZIO», MAROCCO DI MOGLIANO VENETO (TV)

Wide avenues running through delightful gardens lead the way to the large building divided into pavilions including a central block for the general services, a department for boys and a distinct one for girls, a building block including the classrooms of the primary school fitted with rich educational materials, various laboratories, a school of music and singing, gym and a theatre hall. This is how «Villa A. Pancrazio»¹ was described by a group of teachers from Treviso who visited the Medical-Pedagogical Institution of Marocco together with the school inspectress Maria Teresa Pené, in spring 1943². However, the history of this imposing structure dates back to 1898 when Dr. Antonio Pancrazio, psychiatrist, in the provisions of his will left the villa and all the fields belonging to his property to the province of Venice with the request

¹ Antonio Pancrazio, doctor in medicine, provincial deputy and chairman of the administration board at the civil hospital of «Santi Giovanni e Paolo» in Venice.

² cf. «Una visita all’Istituto Medico-Pedagogico di Marocco di Mogliano Veneto» da *Il Piave*, 1943, in AGSdC, 673/B.

to build a hospital to accommodate people with mental health problems coming from rural municipalities of the province³.

It started as Agricultural Colony in 1900. It was used as a separate section of the main mental hospitals, St Servolo's and St Clemente's, in the Veneto Region. About 60 patients who «chronically suffer from dementia, but calm» were sent to this institution to be taken care of and to help in the cultivation of the fields; their products used to supply the necessary food for the psychiatric hospitals present in the Venetian lagoon. After the defeat of Caporetto (24 October - 12 November 1917) until 1920 the Colony was a military hospital of the third Royal Italian army fighting against the forces of the Austro-Hungarian and German soldiers.

After an adequate restructuring, on **5 January 1927** it was inaugurated as the Agricultural Medical-Pedagogical Colony «Pancrazio», welcoming 40 children; since our sisters were invited to assist them, they went there a few days before to prepare the house⁴. On 3 February, the superior Sr. Martina Ciappesoni wrote to mother Vittoria Starmusch, thanking her for the rich providence they found in 'cash' and to let her know that they would start «the new work with commitment and courage, confident of doing some good to children suffering from dementia». They welcomed children from 6 to 12 years, even up to 18 years old; generally all coming from families who had economic problems and had no possibilities to give them an adequate education and moral support; in some cases also children coming from wealthy families. These children were, more or less, the dregs of State Schools and were often scolded or beaten by their parents if they failed the exams. They had lost totally their self-confidence and they considered the Medical-Pedagogical Institute as a place of punishment. The purpose of the Institution was to accept children with remarkable hereditary forms or

³ cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1940, 572ff; Cronistoria dell'Istituto in AGSdC, 673/B, Cronache.

⁴ In the archives in Milan, there are no letters documenting the request of the sisters; from the «Stato Effettivo» of 1926 we get their names and their tasks: Sr. Martina Ciappesoni, Superior; Sr. Adelaide Filippin, assistant; Sr. Justina Gumiero, cook; Sr. Anna Nardini, in charge of the cloakroom, in AGSdC.

serious psychic abnormality, unsuited to face social-environment, taking them away from psychiatric hospitals where they were forced to live close to adults. In the section called agricultural colony there were about 200 children who suffered from chronic insanity, however, they were quiet, harmless and happy to work as peasants or workers. In the Institution there were other children who were mentally challenged or insane.

Among the serious subnormal subjects there were also a few suffering from light abnormal psychic problems; in 1931 an important separation was done in order to avoid that those who were not able to follow the classes due to their constant neuropsychological symptoms and strong intelligence 'deficit' (in fact they needed to be helped to become independent, that is, learning to dress themselves, to make their bed, to observe the main hygienic rules) might affect negatively upon the pupils who had good possibilities to improve. So the incurable children were sent to other institutions and those not severely ill were helped to improve. There were 65 in 1927 and, only ten years later, in 1936, they were 239.

In this way, the aim of the activity was more precise and achievable: to develop the existing energies and to awaken the dormant potentials so that any pupil can, one day, be introduced into society as an active member or be capable of further improvement. The matter in hand was «to blow upon the feeble flame of the wick through schooling and moral education» in order to reactivate it, as one of the sisters underlines⁵, with a clear reference to the redemptive action of Jesus who «will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory» (*Mt 12:20*).

The pre-school education and the primary education was highly improved and as a result the 40% of the children were discharged as they had acquired a normal psychological level and a good intellectual recovery. Two doctors, a general practitioner and a psychiatrist, were always present in the establishment. Methods and means kept on changing with the evolution of medicine, psychology and pedagogy, but the important thing was the intelligent,

⁵ Diary of the community of 1970, in AGSdC, 673/B, Cronache.

inspiring and loving work of the assistants and educators, as each child required a personalized approach. The educator, in his delicate task, is like an artist who has to make up a special project for each pupil. In order to carry out his activities, man has been enriched with a ‘resource’ from which he can draw strength: unlimited love and other appropriate instruments: study, physical exercises, work.

In 1931, the school was completely entrusted to 4 sisters-teachers⁶, their number increased to 8. They all had a specialized diploma in teaching methods for mentally challenged, attained at the «Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica» in Florence or at the speech therapy school, «G. Cardano», in Milan. At the end of each school year, the children sat for the exams, initially at the State Schools in Venice and then in Mogliano. In 1938, the school was officially recognized, both regarding the classes and the legal recognition of the emolument of the teachers.

On 9 May 1942 the director of studies of Mogliano Veneto, Girolamo Muller, sent a written report to the school inspector of Treviso and, for information to the Head Office of the Institution «Pancrazio», Marocco, which for authenticity reasons deserves to be quoted at full-length.

«On 5-6 May (current month) I presided over the exams in classes 3 and 5 and the meetings to assign the marks in classes 1-2-4 of the officially recognized school at the Medical-Pedagogical Institute «Pancrazio». The pupils present for the exams were split up in the following way:

<i>Class 1</i>	n. 24	<i>pupils</i>
<i>Class 2</i>	n. 26	<i>pupils</i>
<i>Class 3</i>	n. 20	<i>pupils</i>
<i>Class 4</i>	n. 17	<i>pupils</i>
<i>Class 5</i>	n. 19	<i>pupils</i>
<hr/>		
<i>Total</i>	n. 106	<i>pupils</i>

The pupils from 7 to 14 years were 60 and those over 14 were 46. The Head Office of the Institution had previously excluded the pupils who were not able to sit for the exams; this is why all the pupils passed the exams. I have noticed a very good preparation in all the classes: the

⁶ Stato effettivo 1931: Sr. Cherubina Berno, Sr. Elvira Dovigo, Sr. Carmelita Martini, Sr. Corinna Pratesi, in AGSdC.

syllabus was totally covered, the fascist culture deeply rooted in every discipline, teaching methods well suited to the mental condition of the pupils. We noticed that their achievements were not the fruit of learning by heart, but the result of learning through hard and personal efforts under the guidance of the five clever teachers, worthy of a well-deserved praise. You know already that the five classrooms are tidy and full of charm, suitable to meet the restless spirit of the pupils, inviting them to choose and to instruct themselves; also the school library was keenly attended by all the pupils. Both teachers and teaching are excellent in all respects»⁷.

Aware and convinced of the value of ergo-therapy as a means of education⁸, the school carried out different activities according to the Montessori-Agazzi method; the classrooms were transformed in workshops where various complementary activities used to take place with the intention to promote the pupils' disposition for manual labour, to shape their personality, to ration their physical energies, to develop their willingness and personal skills which would help them in their vocational orientation. The laboratories for the boys included the making of straw bags, wicker furniture, woodworks, shoemaking, tailoring, blacksmith's mechanical works; the workshops for the girls included: sewing, embroidery, bobbin and fishnet lace. At work, as in studying, every pupil committed himself, engaged himself with a sense of duty, enthusiasm and the joy of success, with precision, and with agile and intelligent ability.

The aptitude test done by the psychologist committed the educator to be very attentive in selecting, through a continuous, authoritative and affectionate assistance, the most suitable position for every pupil. This required an enduring commitment, a patient journey and some times also exhausting, but always done with great love, aiming to help the pupils to be 're-created', in the sense of a

⁷ Letter of 9 May 1942, prot n. 518, in AGSdC, 673/B, Corrispondenza.

⁸ ANGELA DOVIGO, «The work as a means of education at the Medical-Pedagogical Institute», Marocco di Mogliano Veneto, Dissertation of Sr. Elvira Dovigo published in 1943, at the proposal of Prof. Paolo Amaldi from Florence; he has also considered «very interesting the thesis of Sr. Giovanna Tonina» who described a case of meek and feeble mindedness in a false abnormal. Cf. letter of 12 November 1943, prot n. 12, in AGSdC, 673/B, Corrispondenza.

self-regeneration which would help them to be reintroduced in society that previously had excluded them and be active persons, worthy of respect and esteem. Among the quotations of the famous and influential Italian educator, a true genius in the service of children, prof. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), we would like to mention: «We educate only through love, we redeem only through work» and again: «Through work the child becomes a person».

For the social integration of the pupils there were the team gymnastics which included drills in the large gym, the band and the choir at the school of music and singing, trained by valuable and competent lay teachers; the preparation was careful and precise enough to allow them to present recitals or a musical-gym display to relatives, friends, authorities and to the entire educational community, at the end of the school year, with famous parts: «Mameli», «Lombardi», «Nabucco», free-style gymnastics, with clubs and supports, «the Dance of the Dragon-flies», «The Brilliant March» etc.

During the second world war Marocco, located between Treviso and Venice, becomes an area of military operations; the Institution lived moments of anxiety and fear, but the activity continued with the usual pace. Nothing was ever missing to the children, thanks to the plentiful production of crops cultivated in the fields by the chronic patients. After the war, the Institution experiments its most beautiful and rewarding enterprises, it became a linking point and a model for similar institutions and was visited by many teachers and students of other schools. They used to interview the pupils, look at their copybooks and working sheets; most of all, they were attracted by their order, discipline and preparation⁹.

The directress of studies, prof. Marta Ottolenghi Minerbi, in 1949 wrote to Sr. Elvira Dovigo: «I feel the need to express to you and to the sisters my deep appreciation for the excellent preparation of the pupils, without distinction, from class 1 to 5 that reveals not only your competence, but your love for derelict children who, thanks to your noble efforts, receive instruction and a

⁹ cf. Diary of the community. Scuola Magistrale di Chioggia, «Duca degli Abruzzi», Treviso.

preparation for a normal life. It's always a pleasure for me to live, even if only for a few hours, in contact with you who have made of the educational mission the sole aim, a holy purpose of life»¹⁰.

In carrying out their duties, the sisters were subordinate to the director, the doctors and the treasurer; the superior provided for the disciplinary aspect. The sisters worked 39 hours a week and had 10 days holiday each year (30 days from 1976) and they were paid according to their specific tasks: as teachers, assistants, service in the kitchen or in the linen room¹¹.

Among the several superiors transferred here Sr. Stefana Fogale (1875-1964) deserves to be particularly remembered; she animated the community since 1927 to 1953 and the service (9 months after its beginning) to 1964: she was known and loved by all as «the good mother» for her total dedication to God and to the neighbour suffering in body and spirit. She distinguished herself for her *deep interior life* which she cultivated with great spontaneity and this filled her with peace, serenity; a great *humanity* made her hopeful, and able to see the good side in everyone. On 29 January 1963, the president of the province, comm. Alberto Bagaggiolo, awarded her with a golden medal for the «admirable, intelligent and charitable works» which she carried out for 60 years (from 1897 to 1927 in the psychiatric hospitals of S. Clemente and S. Servolo)¹².

Even the director of the Institute, Dr. Italo Salvagno, in the same year, at the end of the scholastic year, felt the need to draw up a written evaluation or «Report regarding the certificates» of the sister-teachers engaged in this important and valuable social work, and he traced the following significant human-professional profile. We wish to report it as a sign of gratitude and esteem towards the sisters.

¹⁰ Letter of 19.5.1949, prot n. 1149: Compiacimento, in AGSdC 673/B, Corrispondenza.

¹¹ Ibid. Agreements, 8 April 1943, signed by the head master, the administration representative of the province of Venice, and by mother Angiolina Reali; 30 July 1973 and 23 July 1977 between the head master prof. Lucio Strumendo and the *pro tempore* provincial superior, Sr. Carla Tagliapietra.

¹² cf. Memories, in AGSdC, 382/1.

- Sr. Raffaella Basso** - a sensitive artist, with a fresh and updated culture, researcher of knowledge, sense of measure.
- Sr. Cherubina Berno** - with a very lively intelligence, outgoing character, intuitive, possessing a deep and updated culture.
- Sr. Angelica Bianco** - with simple and comprehensible loving kindness, analytical intelligence; deep, up-dated, specialized culture and adequate methodology.
- Sr. Elvira Dovigo** - director of the officially recognized school; excellent general education, preparation and professional skills; exceptional talents and teaching qualities, accomplishes her office with care and rare competence, tactfulness, discretion, sensitivity and intelligence. She has never left out any of the initiatives – events, celebrations, performances – fit to give value to the school and the pupils.
- Sr. Francesca Lovato** - good and serene, capable, possessing classical and pedagogical culture and psychological insight, able in using appropriate methods and techniques.
- Sr. Bartolomea Minato** - with keen intelligence, strong-willed character without rigidities, updated from the cultural point of view, a true educator and clever in understanding the soul of the infants and in teaching skills.
- Sr. Angela Perlini** - brilliant teacher, good and experienced; possessing a broad general education, able to apply special teaching-educational methods.
- Sr. Ernesta Pieropan** - outgoing person with a sense of perception; active, with good cultural background, self-confident and friendly, great educator.
- Sr. Giovanna Tonina** - motherly and respectful, with a profound and reflexive intelligence, firm character without harshness; up-dated and suitable culture; follows the pupils with a great and balanced love»¹³.

The scholastic, religious and civic authorities are grateful to all the sisters, also the ones engaged in the assistance and general services, for their «precious, intelligent, motherly» work¹⁴. The relationships between the religious and lay staff were good, there was serene collaboration and mutual respect, and this helped the pupils to recover and to build positive relationships with their families.

¹³ Diary of the community, 1964, in AGSdC, 673/B.

¹⁴ cf. the report of the canonical visit of the provincial superior Sr. C. Tagliapietra in 1972, in AGSdC, 673/B.

The average annual attendance, in certain periods, reached 150/160 children; from the «Registro delle opere» (Records of apostolic works)¹⁵ we get the total number, of a few years, showing a variable flow, although, always above 100.

year	1931	1940	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965
pupils	121	202	150	160	140	173	169

Since 1970 the statistics compiled by the community¹⁶ made a distinction between boys and girls, showing clearly that the number of the boys was greater, underlining also a significant decreasing tendency, even if the annual average included 107 pupils.

year	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976
pupils	<i>m f</i> 110 50	<i>m f</i> 112 50	<i>m f</i> 89 38	<i>m f</i> 82 28	<i>m f</i> 58 24	<i>m f</i> 40 20	<i>m f</i> 25 14
total	160	162	127	110	82	60	39

Without any doubt, the personal knowledge of each child required a process of analysis which includes the senses, the measurement of physical energies, the general conditions of psychical life; however such analysis was, first of all, sought in the key principles of love and deep psychological insight. Sr. E. Dovigo in her thesis already mentioned (p. 30)¹⁷ that abnormalities have a common denominator; they are like pebbles at the bottom of a stream. If you look at them through the water, they all seem to be smooth and round, but if you look at them closely you will notice that they are all unequal. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish, with the eyes of the heart, the false abnormal from the true ones, the real sick from the one who is considered to be such, the bright pupil from the one who is just quick and good in fixing in mind;

¹⁵ cf. Registro delle opere in AGSdC.

¹⁶ cf. Statistiche in AGSdC, 673/B.

¹⁷ see note n. 8.

it is important for the educator to understand with the ‘memory of the heart’ what is happening to the pupil in order to capture the deep motivations of their behavioural variations expressed through a gesture, a sigh, a narration of something that involves them, a confidence which may enlighten them to understand the psychological disorder of their character, certain pathological facts, family maladjustments...; many children are ‘bad’ just because they were not loved and they beg affection¹⁸. The director of studies, prof. Armando Ervas, at the end of the scholastic year 1969-1970 said that the whole development of their personality was the fruit of enduring efforts of rehabilitation, accomplished lovingly and in accordance with the important indications offered by modern psychology.

Meanwhile, the organization of the Institute adapted itself to the times: the children were helped to approach the outside world through audio-visual media, they paid frequent visits to the family (Christmas, Easter, summer holidays, feast days and when relatives wish to see them) and enjoyed various trips and gatherings with their companions. The results obtained with the boys were more encouraging than the ones experienced with the girls; however, reading their personal folders, the comparison between the initial and last data was a big surprise for the adults to see the improvement of the pupils and, above all, to see their success in life.

On 23 June the ex-pupils had their first gathering. Many ex-pupils came to greet, to thank and, if they were married, to introduce their wife and children to the sisters. They sent many cards to the sisters, their educators and teachers, with expressions of gratitude and promises of goodness. Here are some examples:

Revered superior, I convey my wishes to you and to all the sisters, in particular to Sr. Giovanna, my 5th grade teacher. Now that I live in the world, I have a job, I am a shoemaker and I earn a good sum of money every 15 days, working hard with my own hands. My parents are happy. I am still a good boy and I always go to Mass on feast days. I did not write before because I was at work. Give my best wishes to my friends. Your friend. Paolo

¹⁸ cf. Thesis of Sr. Giovanna Tonina, «Un caso di mite frenastenia in un ‘falso’ anormale».

*Reverend Sr. Giovanna, I write this letter with lots of love to thank you again for all the good you have done to me especially at school. At home I continue to be good with my parents and I attend the catechism classes. I always remember the days spent at the boarding school and this thought makes me feel homesick to the point of arousing in me the desire to return back. You must tell the girls of the 5th grade that outside, the world has changed and that they have to prepare themselves properly, to do well as I am doing. I still remember the motto of Galileo Galilei: Trying and trying again. Please convey my greetings to the superior, the sisters and all the girls. **Rosanna**¹⁹*

Other activities were added to the Medical-Pedagogical Institution: the Institution for deaf and dumb (1929), a kindergarten for the children of men called to arms, the Sunday *oratorio* of the parishes of «S. Antonio» and «Favorita» (1940), and «Villa San Giuseppe» in Auronzo as a holiday and retreat house (1947).

But, towards '75, there began to surface difficulties in managing the various services, due to the aging of the sisters and the lack of new resources; besides the Institution passed from the civil province of Venice to the USL (local union for health and social care) and soon, due to the interference of the Trade Unions, there emerged relationship difficulties with the lay staff.

After a careful and prolonged discernment, with great regret and sorrow, the provincial superior, Sr. Reginalda Primola, with her council, informed mother A. Campanile about the reasons that were urging her to suppress the religious community. The reasons given were considered true and the community was suppressed on **9 July 1981**.

The appeal to Rome and the article «Controluce» published on the «Gazzettino» (regional paper) of 24 September 1981, written by the parents, are the last testimonies of great esteem and affection towards the sisters, considered to be the «second mothers for the unlucky children». In fact with their «assiduous and human assistance» the sisters have relieved the suffering of so many children and of their relatives.

¹⁹ Cronaca 1965 in AGSdC 673/B.