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## Foster Parents' Plan. The “invention” of child sponsorship and the launch of its activities in Italy\*

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Foster Parents' Plan (FPP) was established in 1937 to support child victims of the Spanish Civil War. The initial idea came from an English war correspondent who wanted to create “personal ties” between refugee and orphaned children and their benefactors, thus creating one of the very first “child sponsorship” experiments. The “adoptive parents” financially supported the children and maintained contact with them throughout the letter exchange. With the outbreak of the Second World War, FPP extended its aid to children from other countries as well; by the end of the conflict, it was looking after thousands of young Europeans in situations of poverty and hardship. The organisation did not arrive in Italy until 1947, and its first activities were aimed at children who had been admitted to institutions or who had suffered serious physical impairments due to the war. To successfully deal with the most urgent cases and have a direct connection to Italian society, FPP initially sought the support of institutions already active in the peninsula. However, starting from the early 1950s, it began to operate with greater autonomy thanks also to its proven organisational skills.

**Key words:** Child sponsorship, Post-World War II era, Voluntary organisations

During the Second World War and in the years immediately following it, various voluntary organisations — both religious and lay, run mainly by Americans — played an important role in alleviating the dramatic conditions in which the citizens of many of the countries affected by the conflict found themselves; they did so by committing themselves to create a system of social assistance that could continue to function in peacetime.<sup>1</sup> While during the war these organisations had operated mostly behind the lines of the Allied front (the UK, in particular), providing emergency humanitarian aid to displaced populations and refugees, their commitment grew exponentially in the subsequent period. Thus, their interventions came to include actions aimed at the

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<sup>1</sup> See Rachel M. McCleary, *Global Compassion. Private Voluntary Organizations and US Foreign Policy Since 1939*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

welfare of civilians in the delicate moment of reconstruction, which was also meant to be a moral and emotional reconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most topical and important issues of the time — not only for the US government but also for public opinion — was the fate of European children.<sup>3</sup> There was concern about the plight of impoverished children and the measures needed to ensure adequate protection for them; it soon became clear that such a critical and complex situation had to be handled by designated agencies with highly qualified personnel. For example, the United Nations itself sponsored the foundation, in 1946, of the International Children's Emergency Fund (ICEF), which a General Assembly resolution soon transformed into a permanent body, UNICEF, with the contribution of a prestigious group of experts in public health and mother and child care.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, various child protection agencies emerged in those years. Although these worked in close collaboration with governmental institutions that gave them some financial support, the funds at their disposal were mainly the merit of the agencies' individual ability to attract a large number of benefactors from whom they collected donations,<sup>5</sup> often trying to connect each child in need to a designated "adoptive parent" in the United States. In the course of these long-distance adoptions, someone overseas promised to financially support one or more children for a fixed period of time. The aim was to estab-

<sup>2</sup> On these issues, see among others: Richard Ashby Wilson, Richard D. Brown (edited by), *Humanitarianism and Suffering. The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Johannes Paulmann (edited by), *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in Twentieth Century*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016; Silvia Salvatici, *Nel nome degli altri. Storia dell'umanitarismo internazionale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2015; Silvia Salvatici, *Senza casa e senza paese. Profughi europei nel secondo dopoguerra*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2008; Ben Shephard, *The Long Road Home. The Aftermath of the Second World War*, London, Vintage Books, 2010; Jessica Reinisch, *Introduction: Relief in the Aftermath of War*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", vol. 43, n. 3, July 2008; Geoff Eley, *Writing the History of the Aftermath: Europe after 1945*, in "History Workshop Journal", vol. 65, n. 1, Spring 2008; Ben Shephard, "Becoming Planning Minded": *Theory and Practice of Relief. 1940-1945*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", vol. 43, n. 3, July 2008; Jessica Reinisch, *Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of Unrra*, in "Past and Present", vol. 210, n. 6, 2011; Jessica Reinisch, "Auntie Unrra" *at the Crossroads*, in "Past and Present", vol. 218, n. 8, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Yves Denéchère, David Niget (sous la direction de), *Droits des enfants au XXe siècle. Pour une histoire transnationale*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015; Bruno Maida, *L'infanzia nelle guerre del Novecento*, Turin, Einaudi, 2017; Kriste Lindenmeyer, *A Right to Childhood: the US Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-1946*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1997; Michal Ostrovsky, "We Are Standing By": *Rescue Operation of the United States Committee for the Care of European Children*, in "Holocaust and Genocide Studies", 29, n. 2 (Fall 2015); Laura Suski, *Children, Suffering and the Humanitarian Appeal*, in Richard Ashby Wilson, Richard D. Brown (edited by), *Humanitarianism and Suffering. The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> [www.unicef.org/about-us/70-years-for-every-child](http://www.unicef.org/about-us/70-years-for-every-child); see also Townsend Hoopes, Douglas Brinkley, *FDR and the creation of the U.N.*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> R.M. McCleary, *Global Compassion*, cit., pp. 58-63.

lish a bond between "adoptive" parents and "adopted" children, a relationship that was to be nurtured — at least ideally — through the exchange of letters and gifts. Furthermore, it was meant to promote a new understanding between peoples that went beyond official diplomacy, namely by establishing bonds between individuals.<sup>6</sup>

Foster Parents' Plan (hereafter FPP) perfectly fitted the above-mentioned type of institution. After starting its activity in 1937, helping a few hundred child victims of the Spanish Civil War, in the second post-war period it ended up assisting hundreds of thousands of children all over the world. FPP only reached Italy in 1947, two years after the end of the conflict, which was still clearly visible in the country. This initial period was characterised by the need to "gain familiarity" with the new context in which it had to operate, and hence to rely on the recommendations of existing Italian institutions that could direct FPP towards the cases to be followed; within a few years' time, though, there was no longer need to involve the latter as Foster Parents' Plan began to work autonomously.

Unfortunately, very few publications on FPP exist, which furthermore tend to celebrate its activities.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, I have managed to reconstruct the history of its origins in Italy, between the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s, drawing on documents from the Italian Red Cross's archive (kept at the Central Archives of the State in Rome) and the Historical archive of the Don Gnocchi Foundation in Milan; these documents have proven useful because the Red Cross Godmothers' Service and the Don Gnocchi Association for Mutilated Children cooperated intensively with the American organisation. I furthermore consulted material preserved in the United Nation Archives in New York, and I conducted a first, partial exploration of the records of the Special Collections and Archives of the University of Rhode Island.

### **The beginnings: Foster Parents' Plan for Children in Spain and Foster Parents' Plan for War Children**

Nowadays known as Plan International, the international children's aid organisation that helped and supported 1.2 million children in 76 different countries around the world in 2018 alone goes a long way back.<sup>8</sup> It originated as Foster Parents' Plan for Children in Spain, with the objective of supporting child victims of the civil war, and it only took on its current name in 1974, when its projects began to focus almost exclusively on South America, Asia and Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Sara Fieldston, *Little Cold Warriors: Child Sponsorship and International Affairs*, in "Diplomatic History", vol. 38, n. 2, 2014, p. 240.

<sup>7</sup> Henry D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency. The History of Foster Parents' Plan. 1937-1983*, Warwick, RI, Foster Parents Plan International, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://plan-international.org/organisation/history> (last accessed 14 December 2020).

The British war correspondent John Langdon-Davies gave the first impulse to the foundation of Foster Parents' Plan. During the war in Spain, in the spring of 1937, he developed the idea of creating "personal links" between Spanish children — refugees or orphans — and potential benefactors (then mainly British) to facilitate the sending of aid to the tormented country. Plan aimed to avoid, whenever possible, creating a distance between the children and their relatives; thanks to a system that we could define as one of the first experiments in long-distance adoptions, it sought instead to "strengthen" the situation of the family of origin in such a way that the child would not risk being abandoned or placed in an institution. After all, maintaining a child abroad only cost a few cents a day. Plan aimed to act as a link between children in difficulty and so-called "godparents": from the very beginning, the children were encouraged to develop as personal a relationship as possible with these "foster parents" through the exchange of letters, drawings or photographs.

After gaining the support of Duchess Katherine Marjory Stewart-Murray, an influential member of the British Parliament, an exponent of the Conservative Party and a fervent opponent of Chamberlain's non-interventionist policy,<sup>9</sup> in December 1937 Langdon-Davies went to the United States to raise funds and create the American Committee for Foster Parents' Plan. He was accompanied by his friend Eric Muggeridge, a social worker who had spent two years in Spain setting up shelters for children and helping them evacuate from the most dangerous areas.<sup>10</sup> Langdon-Davies and Muggeridge's efforts went beyond the simple act of solidarity, aspiring to become a more general form of defending childhood. As a 1937 appeal of Plan said, "[c]hildren who have lost all personal ties are encouraged to feel the existence of a personal friend rather than a vague dispenser of charity. This is the essence of the Foster Parent's Scheme".<sup>11</sup>

With the fall of Barcelona in January 1939, over a thousand children were evacuated to France, which also became a destination for numerous exiles from Austria, Germany and Poland when the Second World War broke out in September, and Plan changed its name to Foster Parents' Plan for War Children. However, as the German troops rapidly advanced into France, it became necessary to facilitate the relocation of children to safer places, particularly in the UK; keeping families intact was indeed becoming increasingly difficult. With the help of the London County Council, the British Women's Volunteer Service and the International Commission for War Refugees, many of these children were housed in the suburbs of London, which also became a refuge for children from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Malta and the Channel

<sup>9</sup> Han Dijsselbloem et al., *Child Sponsorship and Right-Based Interventions at Plan: Tension and Synergies*, in Brad Watson and Matthew Clarke (edited by), *Child Sponsorship: Exploring Pathways to a Brighter Future*, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 113-120.

<sup>10</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> H. Dijsselbloem et al., *Child Sponsorship and Right-Based Interventions at Plan*, cit., p. 117.

Islands. They were joined by numerous Belgian children after the evacuation of Dunkirk. At the time, Plan's activities in the UK were co-ordinated by Muggeridge, who already in 1940 had proposed to extend the aid to British children who were living with their families but still in need of assistance and care. Thus, nurseries were set up to look after the children of working mothers during the day; the most famous of these "colonies" — set up with the help of Plan — was probably the Hamstead Nurseries, founded by Anna Freud (Sigmund Freud's daughter) and Tiffany Burlingham, an American psychoanalyst specialising in child cases. Refugees with educational, psychological or medical expertise worked in these centres. Building on the experience gained from this fieldwork, Freud and Burlingham produced a series of monthly reports that were published for the first time in 1943, under the title *War and Children* — the first psychological study on the effects of war on children.<sup>12</sup>

Already in 1944, when the destiny of the war was decidedly turning in the Allied armies' favour and a victory over Hitler's Germany did not seem too far away, Plan's staff in the UK and the US — where most of its organisational activities had moved to — predicted that, by the end of the conflict, it would no longer be necessary to provide for refugee children in the UK alone. The real emergency would be that of the children who, in a devastated Europe, more directly and painfully suffered the effects and bore the consequences of the massacre perpetrated in their countries. These children, who had been subjected to abandonment, persecution and the Nazi occupation, were innocent and often unwitting victims: "We have reached a new phase in our work. The end of the war widens our horizons and help can be extended to those countries once under German domination."<sup>13</sup>

There were already thousands of severely impoverished children who had lost everything (starting with their families), who had suffered permanent physical damage and would struggle to find financial help in a continent at the mercy of chaos, whose economy was on its knees. Hence, in the spring of 1944, it was decided that childcare centres should be established in the liberated territories; the first of these was set up in a Catholic school in Malta,<sup>14</sup> thanks to the efforts of Father H.P. Bleach. Similar structures soon followed in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Italy. In the meantime, Plan's head-

<sup>12</sup> Edna Blue, *Sirens and School Bells*, undated brochure, New York, Foster Parents' Plan, in United Nation Archives, New York, Archive of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1943-1946), folder on Foster Parent's Plan for War Children. See also Anna Freud and Dorothy T. Burlingham, *War and Children* (edited by Philip R. Lehrman), Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1973; Plan International, *A Journey of Hope. The History of Plan International. 1937-1998*, Surrey (UK), Plan International, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Edna Blue, *Sirens and School Bells*, undated brochure, New York, Foster Parents' Plan, in United Nation Archives, New York, Archive of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1943-1946), folder on Foster Parent's Plan for War Children.

<sup>14</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., pp. 77-78.

quarters was permanently moved to New York, the city where — also for practical reasons — most of the American charities active at the time had their headquarters: from the port of this city, it was relatively easier and simpler to embark goods (i.e. clothes, food and medical supplies) to be sent to Europe.<sup>15</sup>

By October 1944, Father Bleach had raised enough money to look after a hundred children in Italy. On 4 December, he telegraphed Plan's headquarters in New York to communicate that he had succeeded in opening four colonies in Rome: two in southern Italy for Yugoslav refugee children, and one in Catania. The priest cared for a total of 125 children in Italy and Malta, and he hoped to obtain further funds to assist more.<sup>16</sup>

### **Foster Parents' Plan for War Children in Italy**

The turning point for Foster Parents' Plan in Italy only arrived in May 1947, when the person in charge of European affairs, Fred Mason, went to Rome to appoint a director on site who could follow the situation more directly. It was also a question of finding suitable premises for the organisation's offices and discussing its projects and activities with the local authorities, as well as identifying the first truly needy children to be entrusted to FPP. After several weeks of fruitless negotiations and growing frustration, Mason succeeded in securing a favourable agreement with the Italian government for a good dollar exchange rate and the promise of office space at the National Mother and Child Agency (Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia, hereafter ONMI) in Rome.<sup>17</sup> In that first period, Plan also accepted to support some of the ONMI's activities, sending material "in food and clothing" to be distributed among 450 needy children from the Roman suburbs of Tormarancia, Garbatella and Tor Pignattara who had been selected by the charity:

The Opera's commissioner, Dr Ignazio Gueli, spoke to the Foster Parents Delegate for Italy, Miss Baccanelli, to convey the beneficiaries' recognition, asking her to transmit the gratitude of the Italian children to the generous American donors. Ms Baccanelli replied to him with kind words, stressing the moral and social value of the American People's initiative in favour of the children of the European Nations that have been most affected by the war.<sup>18</sup>

Mason's choice of director for the new programme in Italy fell on a young Italian American woman, Elma Baccanelli. A Columbia graduate and pupil of Prezzolini, Baccanelli had served on the staff of New York Mayor Fiorello

<sup>15</sup> R.M. McCleary, *Global Compassion*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., p. 78

<sup>17</sup> Michela Minesso (ed.), *Stato e infanzia nell'Italia contemporanea. Origini, sviluppo e fine dell'Onmi. 1925-1975*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2007, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> *Informazioni e Notizie*, in "Maternità e Infanzia", September-October 1947, p. 49.

La Guardia. During the Second World War, she had been an officer in the US Army Auxiliary Corps, carrying out various missions for the Office of War Information in the United States and Algeria. A few days after Italy was liberated from Nazi-Fascism, she was assigned to Italy where she worked for the US Information Service (hereafter USIS) and subsequently for the American Embassy in Rome.<sup>19</sup> She met Mason when she was assistant to the cultural attaché at the embassy; Mason convinced her to direct Plan from Rome, a job to which she "devoted" herself until the Italian office closed in 1969. She also met her future husband — the journalist Carlo Laurenzi — at the American embassy, and she in fact never returned to live in the United States.<sup>20</sup> From Plan's offices in Via Lucullo, not too far from Via Veneto, Baccanelli managed the organisation's activities for over twenty years, understanding the most urgent needs of the assisted children and knowing how to adapt to them, also depending on the changes that were gradually affecting Italian society.

In the beginning, FPP's actions focused on children hosted by institutions in various parts of Italy, especially those who had suffered physical disabilities during the conflict. It moved on to assist those still living with their families only in a subsequent moment. To deal with the most urgent cases and to have a more direct contact with the Italian situation, in this first period, support was often sought from organisations present in the area, such as the aforementioned ONMI but also the Red Cross Godmothers' Service and the Don Gnocchi Association for Mutilated Children.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in June 1947, Mason visited the Orphanage of San Michele, a shelter for young mutilated children in the suburbs of Rome, and immediately took charge of it. The following year, Don Orione's Home for mutilated children in Milan became another one of the institutions benefiting from FPP funds thanks to a generous donation from Arturo Toscanini and the hard work of Don Gnocchi, who supervised it. Maestro Toscanini, already an active supporter of the international organisation,<sup>22</sup> was also very close to Don Gnocchi, so

<sup>19</sup> *Meet Plan's Directors. The People Who Help You Help Your Foster Child. Mrs. Elma B. Laurenzi, Director in Italy*, in "Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962", Foster Parents' Plan Inc., 1962.

<sup>20</sup> See Laura Laurenzi, *L'americana*, in *Il bicchiere mezzo pieno. I piccoli miracoli quotidiani che cambiano la vita*, Milan, Piemme, 2018, pp. 107-124; Laura Laurenzi, *La madre americana*, Milan, Solferino, 2019, pp. 9-19 and 31-40.

<sup>21</sup> Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Ufficio Madrinato, b. 44-52; Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

<sup>22</sup> Other documents on the relationship between Don Gnocchi and Arturo Toscanini are held at the University of Rhode Island Library Special Collections and Archives, Foster Parents Plan International, Italy: Toscanini, Arturo and Walter, Milan Colony Donation, 1949-1951, box 159, folder 471. Plan's collaboration with Don Gnocchi during the very first years of its activity in Italy is unique as far as relations with Catholic bodies are concerned, except for those with individual institutes, and can almost certainly be traced back to the ties with Arturo Toscanini and

much so that when the Association of Friends of Don Orione's Home for mutilated children (of which Don Gnocchi was president) was founded, on 1 August 1948, Toscanini was appointed honorary president.<sup>23</sup> Thanks to both their and Plan's commitment, a state-of-the-art operating theatre was set up in Milan. In 1949, the Federation for Mutilated Children produced a documentary called *Fiori nella bufera* (Flowers in the storm) about the Home for mutilated children in Milan and, more generally, about the problem of Italian children with permanent wounds inflicted by the war or, in subsequent years, by unexploded war devices.<sup>24</sup> FPP distributed the documentary — dubbed for the foreign market — in the United States under the title *For Us War Goes On*.<sup>25</sup> The aim was to raise awareness of the problem among the American public and to facilitate the participation of potential benefactors in the patronage programme. In 1949, FPP's first executive director, Edna Blue, gave an account of her visit to one of the funded facilities in Italy:

Today we visited some war blinded [*sic*] children, many of whom were also maimed [...]. There is one little boy, totally blind, with both arms missing above the elbows. The child has developed his stumps to almost the same sensitivity as his fingers would have had. And he uses his lips to read braille [...]. It seems that during the war many bad amputations were made [...]. Some doctors were so rushed they just guillotined the limbs without leaving decent fleshy flaps [...] and the child must be operated on again to saw the bone.<sup>26</sup>

In post-war Europe, thousands of children were mutilated, visually impaired or suffering from mental illness. Blue estimated that about thirty-seven per cent of the 12,000 children then cared for by Plan needed artificial limbs, plastic surgery and glass eyes. These numbers did not include children suffering from malnutrition or the 75 per cent of those who had — or were suspected

his family, in particular his daughter Wally and his son Walter, both friends of Don Gnocchi and supporters of FPP.

<sup>23</sup> Edoardo Bressan, *Don Carlo Gnocchi. Una vita al servizio degli ultimi*, Milan, Oltre, 2017, pp. 162-163. On the figure and the work of Don Carlo Gnocchi see also: Giorgio Rumi, Edoardo Bressan, *Don Carlo Gnocchi. Vita e opere di un grande imprenditore della carità*, Milan, Mondadori, 2002; Edoardo Bressan, *Don Carlo Gnocchi. Una vita al servizio degli ultimi*, Milan, Mondadori, 2009; Luisa Bove, *Don Carlo Gnocchi*, Milan, Paoline, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> *Fiori nella bufera*, directed by Ermanno F. Scopinich, 13 min. and 31', 1949. This documentary, which has recently been restored, was commissioned by Don Gnocchi himself to raise awareness among the Italian public opinion of the plight of child amputees and the problem of mines and unexploded bombs; the contribution of Maestro Arturo Toscanini, a friend of Don Gnocchi and supporter of his work, was essential. Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan.

<sup>25</sup> *For Us War Goes On*, directed by Ermanno F. Scopinich, 14 min. and 45', 1949. "The film is narrated by Ben Grauer, a US radio and TV personality and also a Plan sponsor. The film focusses on the work of Foster Parents' Plan for War Children in Italy, specifically on children living in a Plan colony who were left disabled during the war". Foster Parents' Plan Italy, <https://mediabank.plan-international.org>.

<sup>26</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., p. 79.



of having — tuberculosis.<sup>27</sup> Italy alone counted 15,000 mutilated children. To provide more efficient support, the Doctors' Committee for Foster Parents Plan for War Children was founded, which gathered plastic and orthopaedic surgeons from various countries around the world. Franco Davide, an Italian child who had lost both legs, was chosen as a "case in point" for the appeal to potential donors in the United States and Canada; photographs of Davide both without and with artificial limbs were used to illustrate an appeal made in February 1949, signed by Blue herself.

Franco is but one of thousands of children who have been maimed and disfigured by war, orphaned or left in great need. Funds are needed for artificial limbs, plastic surgery, food, clothing and all the things needed in life for a little child.<sup>28</sup>

To keep the solidarity alive and constant, it was necessary to concretely show how Plan used the donations from American godfathers and godmothers. In the same period, another Italian boy — Carmelo Bova, from Palmi in Calabria — reached a rather sad "celebrity" status because of his condition: he had lost both his upper limbs and was in an institution in Rome. He had received wide media coverage at the end of the war, thanks to a drawing dedicated to President Truman that he had made by holding the pencils with his mouth.<sup>29</sup> Plan took an interest in his case and covered all the costs so that Bova could travel to the United States: in July 1948, he was operated on by Dr Henry Kessler, director of the Newark Home for Crippled Children in New Jersey, where he was fitted with state-of-the-art, custom-made artificial limbs.<sup>30</sup> After a necessary period of rehabilitation, Bova returned to the Roman institute that had taken him in before his trip overseas, thanks also to the contribution of his American godparents — his parents would not have been able to take adequate care of him and meet his "special" needs in his native Calabria. However, in November 1949, Don Gnocchi managed to have Bova accepted in his institute in Pessano con Bornago — where there were other amputee children — so that he could resume a "relatively normal" life.<sup>31</sup> Having been selected to receive expert

<sup>27</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., pp. 79-80.

<sup>28</sup> *USA appeal, February 1949, Foster Parents' Plan for War Children, Front letter written by Edna Blue, International Chairman.* "This appeal includes an image, and a letter and information about Plan's work. [...] This was produced with the aim to encourage people to support the organization and help the children". Foster Parents' Plan Italy, <https://mediabank.plan-international.org>.

<sup>29</sup> *Drawing by Carmelo Bova, double amputee now with artificial limbs. Carmelo drew this by holding the pen and crayons in his teeth*, 1949-ITA-03.jpg, <https://mediabank.plan-international.org>.

<sup>30</sup> *Foster child Carmelo Bova takes photo with his newly fitted artificial arms*, 1949-USA-01.jpg, <https://mediabank.plan-international.org>.

<sup>31</sup> Elma Baccanelli to Don Gnocchi, 10 November 1949 and Don Gnocchi to Elma Baccanelli, 14 November 1949, in Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

medical assistance in the United States, a year and a half earlier, the young man had subsequently led a “life of representation”, filled with photoshoots, interviews and appearances at various charity events. Replying to a letter from the director of Plan Italy, who asked that Bova be allowed to travel to Rome to meet Edna Blue during her visit to the capital, Don Gnocchi begged Elma Baccanelli to spare the young man this trip. He requested that such opportunities for visibility be limited in that they were detrimental to his education: they “had gone to his head” and made him believe that his fame could last forever.<sup>32</sup>

Bova is now on the eve of independent life [...]. He should at least attend the five years of primary school, but at 15 he is in his second year, risking not to pass even this one. [...] But this is also a result of the distracted life that he has had to lead until now. [...] He is already a difficult boy; the system has made him worse and only now, in the hands of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, is he getting back in touch with reality, which is very hard for him.<sup>33</sup>

In the same letter, Don Gnocchi also said that Italy was by then capable of producing artificial limbs: “Currently [Bova] is entirely armless. The American ones are... miniature because of his greatly increased stature. Those being constructed in Parma, in our workshop, are still sketched out.”<sup>34</sup>

Without a doubt, the FPP funds were put to good use. In recognition of its efforts to rehabilitate mutilated children, in 1950 the organisation received two important awards: the first-class Order of Merit from the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, and the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity. Plan continued to assist amputee children in collaboration with Don Gnocchi until 1952, the year in which Law 648 of 1950 became fully effective.<sup>35</sup> Paralysed, mutilated and blind children now began to receive a regular disability pension from the Italian government and Plan’s intervention in this area was suspended, as were other “external” collaborations.

However, the American organisation had greatly expanded its activities during that same period, especially in the most disadvantaged areas of the peninsula. Poverty was most dramatic in the South, and Fred Mason had travelled through much of Southern Italy in an attempt to understand where the organisation’s interest might lie.

The mere fact that Plan help, extensive as it is, can take care of only a tiny fraction of so much really sickening misery, makes it imperative that we assist only the worst cases, which

<sup>32</sup> Don Gnocchi to Elma Baccanelli, 4 March 1950, in Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

<sup>33</sup> Don Gnocchi to Elma Baccanelli, 4 March 1950, in Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

<sup>34</sup> Don Gnocchi to Elma Baccanelli, 4 March 1950, in Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

<sup>35</sup> Law 648 of 10 August 1950, “Reorganisation of the provisions on military pensions”, published in the Official Gazette on 1 September 1950, Suppl. Ord. n. 200.

means that we have to be selective to a degree that would seem positively inhuman, to an untrained observer. In spite of my supposed conditioning to his sort of thing, my trip into southern Italy bought back all too actively, the old familiar gnawing heartaches which leave me miserable and depressed at the end of a long day, during which I have had to bid adieu to so many people who are so obviously in every conceivable kind of want, [...] the doubly unfortunate children for whom, utterly destitute relatives are striving, scheming and stealing — yes — stealing, some of them — to keep the children alive, and when I say “keep them alive”, I mean just that and no more.<sup>36</sup>

According to Mason, the expression “poor beyond belief” best described the situation.<sup>37</sup> In Naples, he met a woman who had lost her husband, her home and all her possessions during an air raid. She had nowhere to go: there were no relatives to take her in, and the few habitable houses that remained standing were overcrowded. A cave on the edge of the city offered the only possible refuge for her and her children: the latter were dressed in rags, whereas old pieces of cardboard stopped the rain and wind from entering the cave, also providing a minimum of privacy for the family. Often the only meal the woman managed to prepare was a soup made by boiling dandelion and other herbs. Stones sprouted from the cave’s uneven floor, whereas the family’s furniture — a bed and a table — was made from old pieces of packaging. Not least, the cave had to be shared with 64 other families.<sup>38</sup>

Mason also reported on another case that had particularly struck him, regarding one of the many sick children. This story illustrated the dramatic situation of poverty in Italy, where less than four dollars could make the difference between life and death — four dollars were, in fact, the necessary amount of money to buy the medicines that could help a child survive in the province of Foggia. However, the easily available doses of streptomycin and penicillin cost 2,400 lire: not even a petition among the villagers could raise that kind of money. Mason did not hesitate to buy the necessary drugs and give them to the family himself, but he knew that Plan could not follow this case since the child was not a victim of the war and still had both parents, who could — at least formally — have provided for him.

This was exactly the issue; apart from the exceptional measures taken by the European director during his visit to Italy, the detailed work that Elma Baccanelli carried out every single day should have been the real heart of the programme. The Roman headquarters of FPP was located a stone’s throw from the American embassy, in the Via Veneto area — then the epicentre of a “reckless” worldliness compared to what were generally times of hardship. Plan occupied a flat with half a dozen adjoining rooms where the doors always had

<sup>36</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> University of Rhode Island, Library Special Collections and Archives, Foster Parents Plan International, Italy: Fred W. Mason, Field Report, New Areas in Italy, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1951, box 158, folder 461.

<sup>38</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., p. 81.

to be wide open, as the director had established.<sup>39</sup> This way, the staff — about ten employees in all — could always be in close contact. However, Baccanelli's work was not and could not be mere office work: at least once every fortnight, an inspection in the field was necessary. Thus, she would leave Rome to reach the outermost areas of the peninsula, those most in need of help, travelling in any weather condition and along roads that were still bumpy and often dangerous, in a car — “more of a van than a sedan” — fully loaded with parcels, boxes, sacks, consumer goods, blankets, shoes, medicines and sweets, and anything that was considered useful for the children they were going to meet and assist, or even just encourage.<sup>40</sup>

Who the first children helped by Plan in Italy exactly were can be deducted from the forms that had to be filled out by those organisations that proposed candidates to be godmothers, which were mainly childcare institutions.<sup>41</sup> The assisted children had to be war orphans, even only with a single parent if the latter was unable to look after them, the children of severely disabled or war-disabled people, or they had to have personally suffered physical damage as a result of the conflict. Despite Mason's conviction that the South was the place where assistance was needed most, in the early years requests also frequently arrived from the North (including from the “rich” Emilia Romagna region) or from central Italy.<sup>42</sup>

The forms contained no less than 39 points, all of which had to be completed in full, and which ranged from the simple details of the child — name (but also nickname), gender, age, date and place of birth, religion, school and class attendance, future aspirations — to those concerning the parents and any siblings.<sup>43</sup> Particular attention was to be paid to point 36, “General information about the child”, the answer to which should clearly explain the child's family situation: death or illness of the father or other relatives due to the conflict, the child's current economic conditions, and whether it had any prob-

<sup>39</sup> I have taken most of the information about Elma Baccanelli from the recollections of her daughter, Laura Laurenzi, contained in the short story *L'americana*, cit., pp. 107-124, and in the book *La madre americana*, cit.

<sup>40</sup> L. Laurenzi, *L'americana*, cit., p. 120.

<sup>41</sup> Norme per la compilazione dei moduli del Foster Parents' Plan for War Children, no date, in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>42</sup> The institutions that asked for Plan's patronage through the Red Cross were located in Modena and throughout its province, in Misano Adriatico, Pesaro, Massa Marittima and Rome, in its poorest neighbourhoods and in the province. See Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folders 44, 45, 46.

<sup>43</sup> See Questionario d'ammissione al Foster Parents' Plan, no date, in Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

lems, including relational, health or moral problems.<sup>44</sup> The forms had to be accompanied by a full-length photograph (in four copies, on film) of the child dressed "like every day",<sup>45</sup> and "with flowers or other decorative elements" in the background — perhaps to give at least a semblance of normality to the everyday life of these children, even if they often wore the uniform of the institution where they were hospitalised.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Plan requested that the sole of the child's right foot (drawn on tissue paper) be sent along, probably to facilitate the potential gift or purchase of a pair of shoes.<sup>47</sup>

Almost all the children were smiling in the photographs: they all look like lively little girls and rascals on whose faces it is difficult to read the pain and misery that the attached profiles recounted. Their stories, if read one after another, all seem tragically similar, almost indistinguishable and even "banal" for a country coming out of the war, as the following three examples demonstrate: fathers killed during the conflict, in battle or by Allied bombing, gone missing in Russia or rounded up by the Germans; sick mothers with humble and miserable jobs, or no job at all; numerous siblings, a destroyed house, scarce food, a precarious life and the children left all to themselves.

- The father was shot dead by the Germans on 18/3/44, in retaliation. The mother, in poor health, has to support three other children. Poor economic conditions. N. is good, obliging and zealous; from 10/6/46 she is admitted to the Sacra Famiglia Orphanage in San Damaso (Modena).<sup>48</sup>
- The father is missing in Montenegro. The mother, a laundress, has to take care of two other children, both suffering from primary TB. Until last June, the National Liberation Committee of San Damaso acted as Godfather, but this was dissolved on 1 July and the child is therefore without a Godfather. He has been hospitalised at the Suffrage Institute of Magreta.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Elma Baccanelli to Mariuccia Meda, Pro Infanzia mutilata, 10 February 1948, in Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

<sup>45</sup> Elma Baccanelli to Mariuccia Meda, Pro Infanzia mutilata, 10 February 1948, in Archivio storico Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Milan, Fondo Fondazione Pro Juventute, box 21, folder on Enti stranieri.

<sup>46</sup> Norme per la compilazione dei moduli del Foster Parents' Plan for War Children, no date, Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>47</sup> The characteristics of the photographs and footprint drawings that had to be attached clearly emerge from the documents held in folders 44, 45 and 46, in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato.

<sup>48</sup> N.A., 1938, no date, Elenco nominativo di orfani già ricoverati in Istituti — Modena, in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>49</sup> I.V., 1939, no date, Elenco nominativo di orfani già ricoverati in Istituti — Modena, Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

- She lived with her old and sick grandparents. Her mother died in the bombings. Her father died in Russia in 1944. The girl, along with her brother, were taken in by their grandparents, but it can be said that they were left to live on the streets.<sup>50</sup>

Some of these stories were also closely linked to the most tragic events of the war years, such as the “Moroccans’ deeds” or the Fosse Ardeatine massacre.

- Her mother has been persecuted by two Maroquins and was killed in front of the child, who has had a serious nervous shock and never quite recovered; learning at school is very difficult for her. Otherwise quite normal. Her father is without a work, has remarried and takes some interest in the child.<sup>51</sup>
- His father was a captain in the army and was killed by the Germans in the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine (Rome) with other 320 Italians on the 24 March 1944. His family didn’t need help before the father’s death but now they are in very bad economic conditions.<sup>52</sup>

### The efficiency of a tried-and-tested system

The long-distance adoption system used by FPP was by no means paternalistic, bureaucratic and complex; on the contrary, it tended to be functional and pragmatic. It was conceived as a form of personal assistance and should always have maintained this character. It was never FPP as an institution that gave charity to a certain institution, but an individual American citizen — or a group of students, friends or colleagues — who helped a child through this organisation. Plan defined itself — and tried to be — a purely secular body and preferred to operate on its own, mostly to be able to maintain its non-denominational identity. Its top management, in fact, knew well how complicated the Italian situation was, from a political and religious point of view:

A further complication in Italy [...] is the fact that the country is riddled with Political Religious and “Politico-Religio” (my own word) parties and factions.

It was said to me “Yes, but if you put a Jew in charges [*sic*] of your organisation in Italy, everyone will think that it is an ANTI-CATHOLIC Plan.” On the other hand, if you give money and food to Roman Catholics for poor children, they will give it all to the Catholic children and will see a Protestant or a Jewish child starve. In this country, no one does anything for nothing, no one is disinterested or impartial, and no one would ever believe that the Foster Parents’ Plan had not got some political axe to grind, or some string to pull.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Record on M.C, 1935 — Istituto Maria Pia Mecheri, Velletri, 29 July 1947, in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents’ Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>51</sup> Record on O.R., 1940, Colonia della Garbatella, no date, in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents’ Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 45.

<sup>52</sup> Record on B.F., 1936, no date, Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents’ Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>53</sup> University of Rhode Island, Library Special Collections and Archives, Foster Parents Plan International, Italy: Letter from Fred Mason to Edna Blue, Rome 24<sup>th</sup> May 1947, box 157, folder 451.

Likewise, the interpersonal relations with a "certain priest and nuns" who managed various institutes for minors had initially been complicated, to say the least, and it had generated a certain distrust among Plan's emissaries.<sup>54</sup> The latter concluded that the only reliable offices in Italy were those of the American embassy and, therefore, ensured that the management of the various cases remained as internal as possible.

Whenever a child was proposed, the FPP director in Italy was called to investigate the case and forward the file to the New York office. As soon as the child was "godfathered", the American office informed the Rome office and the director contacted the head of the relevant institution.<sup>55</sup>

Aspiring Foster Parents in the United States received a brochure that explained in detail how to proceed with the "Application to Become a Foster Parent to a War Child".<sup>56</sup> It was instantly clear, starting from the cover, that the programme would protect both parties (i.e. "parents" and children). Each Foster Parent had to guarantee their help for a minimum period of one year and agree to maintain a personal relationship with the child in their care; the latter, in turn, would immediately have known who was helping them from overseas through a letter exchange that would be managed by Plan's offices. For this purpose, both benefactors and beneficiaries were assigned a number (Parent's Number and Child's Number respectively) that would have to appear on cheques and letters: "This insures your payment being credited to the correct account. Failure to include your number causes expense and delay in acknowledgement of your payment."<sup>57</sup> All letters addressed to Foster Children invariably had to be forwarded to Plan's office in New York, and the name and personal number had to be indicated at the top right of the letter, together with the child's identification number and its country of residence. There was no need for additional postage: one time a week, the letters were sent all at once, by express airmail, without further charge to the parents.<sup>58</sup> All letters were

<sup>54</sup> University of Rhode Island, Library Special Collections and Archives, Foster Parents Plan International, Italy: Letter from Fred Mason to Edna Blue, Rome 9<sup>th</sup> March 1948, box 157, folder 452.

<sup>55</sup> Elma Baccanelli, Metodo da seguire dai direttori di Istituti che hanno proposto bambini, vittime di guerra al Madrinato americano Foster Parents' Plan for War Children Inc. e che hanno avuto un numero di bambini accettati, cyclostyled sheet, no date (c. 1948), in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce rossa italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>56</sup> Application to Become a Foster Parent to a War Child, undated brochure, New York, Foster Parents' Plan, in United Nation Archives, New York, Archive of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1943-1946), folder on Foster Parent's Plan for War Children.

<sup>57</sup> Information for Foster Parents, undated brochure, in Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, International Social Service United States of America Branch records, box 11, folder 11.09.

<sup>58</sup> Information for Foster Parents, undated brochure, in Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, International Social Service United States of America Branch records, box 11, folder 11.09.

translated at Plan's office in the country where the Foster Child lived; parents and children received both the original letter and the translation. As a precautionary measure for the safety of the American donors, it was expressly recommended that the godparents' address should not be revealed, either through the stationery or in the letter itself. In fact, Plan strongly discouraged any direct communication between parents and adoptive children, for a very simple reason: in countries suffering conditions of extreme poverty and great need, such as post-war Italy, "the name and address of a generous benefactor is much sought after".<sup>59</sup> Direct inquiries from the beneficiaries or their relatives would only have created confusion, discomfort and embarrassment.

The Foster Parents could otherwise write about anything they wanted to their adopted child: where they came from (without, of course, mentioning the exact address), their home, their friends, the school they had attended or were attending, their pets, the little things they did every day. The children who received these letters generally treasured them and the accompanying photographs. Not surprisingly, the name and Foster Parent's number also had to be indicated on the back of each photograph to prevent the latter from getting lost if it was accidentally separated from the letter.

On several occasions, Elma Baccanelli herself dealt with the Italian children, sending highly detailed letters to every institute that asked for Plan's patronage. To facilitate everyone's work, the directors of the various reception structures were asked to follow the instructions closely.<sup>60</sup> Every month, the children who had been sponsored had to write a letter to their American godfather or godmother, exclusively on the special 20x16 cm writing paper distributed by Plan's office. The letters had to begin with the Foster Parent's name (for example, "Dear Mrs Smith" or "Dear Mr Bell"), and they always had to be personal, paying less attention to the form than to the content: the recipients were keen to learn something about the life of the child they were helping, about its aspirations, what it was doing every day.<sup>61</sup> Here, too, the institute's or the child's address was never to be specified, only the relevant reference numbers. There was a kind of box at the top left of the stationery that

<sup>59</sup> Information for Foster Parents, undated brochure, in Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, International Social Service United States of America Branch records, box 11, folder 11.09.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Elma Baccanelli, *Metodo da seguire dai direttori di Istituti che hanno proposto bambini, vittime di guerra al Madrinato americano Foster Parents' Plan for War Children Inc. e che hanno avuto un numero di bambini accettati*, cyclostyled sheet, no date (c. 1948), in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>61</sup> Elma Baccanelli, *Metodo da seguire dai direttori di Istituti che hanno proposto bambini, vittime di guerra al Madrinato americano, Foster Parents' Plan for War Children Inc. e che hanno avuto un numero di bambini accettati*, cyclostyled sheet, no date (c. 1948), in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.



had to be filled out by the directors or managers of the centres where the children were lodging. In this space, in block letters and pencil, the godparent's number had to be indicated under the letter "F.", whereas the child's number and name had to be written — again in pencil — next to the words "Foster Child". Above all, it was recommended that the letters be sent to Plan's Roman office on a regular basis so that they would arrive by the tenth of each month. Any requests to send along photographs were often difficult to comply with as taking a snapshot was a real luxury at the time. Occasionally Baccanelli herself, or one of her collaborators, would photograph the children and, of course, translate their letters into English; vice versa, they would translate those written by the American "parents" into Italian.<sup>62</sup> If, for health or any other reason, the child was unable to write by itself, it was suggested that a companion write the letter; in the most extreme cases, the director of the foster home had to write a few lines to the adoptive parents, explaining the reasons for the impediment. Baccanelli added a "small threat" to these indications, mostly to make them more effective: monthly payments would only be made for children who had fulfilled their duty.<sup>63</sup>

Everything was well codified, even bordering on the obvious, with the precise intention of maintaining a certain order. Thus, the children were asked to answer their godparents' letters to the point: "This prevents the children from writing their letters in advance. This practice is not allowed and may result in the child being removed from the lists."<sup>64</sup>

The "American parents" often also sent gift packages to their godchildren, and the child would be required to write a thank-you note, referring to the contents of the box: they would have to confirm if the gifts were of the right size and if they had appreciated them. This additional letter was in no way meant to replace the monthly one and would be forwarded immediately to Plan's office, without waiting until all the letters from that institution would be sent together.

If the adopted children wanted to make drawings, their creative flair had to be executed on special paper; a box identical to the one on the stationery was printed on the back of the paper, and it had to be filled out in the same

<sup>62</sup> L. Laurenzi, *L'americana*, cit., p. 121.

<sup>63</sup> Elma Baccanelli, Metodo da seguire dai direttori di Istituti che hanno proposto bambini, vittime di guerra al Madrinato americano, Foster Parents' Plan for War Children Inc. e che hanno avuto un numero di bambini accettati, cyclostyled sheet, no date (c. 1948), in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>64</sup> Elma Baccanelli, Metodo da seguire dai direttori di Istituti che hanno proposto bambini, vittime di guerra al Madrinato americano, Foster Parents' Plan for War Children Inc. e che hanno avuto un numero di bambini accettati, cyclostyled sheet, no date (c. 1948), in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents' Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

way. The drawings would then be sent to the United States as “attachments”. Furthermore, since many of the facilities where the children were placed provided manual activities strictly differentiated according to gender, as was then the norm, it was considered good practice to encourage a child if it expressed the desire to make something special. Thus, the carpentry workshops attended by boys might produce simple wooden objects, while the girls would embroider a handkerchief during domestic education hours. These items had to be “individual”, that is, designed as a gift from a particular child to its godfather, hence not part of some collective project that could diminish the value of the gesture.<sup>65</sup>

Baccanelli was also a meticulous administrator: every entry and exit was necessarily documented. For each fiscal year, she reported the number of assisted children, the miles she and her staff travelled to reach the children and the expenditure of the invested funds, item by item. Each expense was reported to the penny, whether it was medical care (especially vaccines and vitamins), textbooks, shoes or clothes, but also bicycles.<sup>66</sup>

Generally, children under 12 were assisted as Foster Children and remained in the programme until they reached the age of 16. The only exceptions were made for children who applied to high school, for whom contributions were made until the end of their studies.<sup>67</sup>

### **Some “results” of Foster Parents’ Plan in Italy**

From the early 1950s onwards, many things changed in the management of Plan in Italy; as the staff at the Rome office became more familiar with the situation in the country and gained a clearer understanding of the children’s real needs, which could vary from one part of the peninsula to another, their management of the activities also changed significantly. Thus, the priority was no longer to assist amputee children, even if these had been the organisation’s first concern when it established itself in Italy, as stated in the first issue of *Lifelines*, a publication celebrating Plan’s twenty-fifth year of activity:

There were over 10,000 mutilated children in Italy when Plan launched its healing work there. In areas where no other relief agency was operating, Plan went to aid the suffering youngsters... in Monteflavio, Carchitti, Poli [in the province of Rome]... to the very tip of

<sup>65</sup> Elma Baccanelli, Metodo da seguire dai direttori di Istituti che hanno proposto bambini, vittime di guerra al Madrinato americano, Foster Parents’ Plan for War Children Inc. e che hanno avuto un numero di bambini accettati, foglio ciclostilato, no date (c. 1948), in Archivio centrale dello Stato, Fondo Croce Rossa Italiana, Servizio madrinato, Foster Parents’ Plan, Comitato Centrale, Ufficio madrinato, folder 44.

<sup>66</sup> L. Laurenzi, *L’americana*, cit., pp. 121-122.

<sup>67</sup> H.D. Molumphy, *For Common Decency*, cit., p. 2.

Sicily... where blind children with little stumps for hands were rescued from the misery in which they lived. There was Italo, a pint-sized boy with a giant will. He had neither hands nor eyes, but learned to read Braille with his lips... The great Arturo Toscanini provided funds for a special operating room in Plan's Milan Colony for Mutilated Children. The Maestro was a contributor and sponsor until his death.<sup>68</sup>

The cases Plan dealt with were increasingly chosen directly by the American organisation and, as time went by, an attempt was made to increase the number of children living with their families of origin, rather than those in institutions. What never changed, though, was the practice of exchanging letters and sending gifts, which remained a constant: "From children in Italy to Foster Parents in America came letters of gratitude [...] for food and clothes, for a roof and bed,"<sup>69</sup> and "[t]he soccer ball [...] gives the poorest boy a sense of pride. Here a Foster Child plays with a ball sent by his Foster Parent."<sup>70</sup>

An analysis of *Lifelines*, of which at least two issues were published in 1962,<sup>71</sup> enables a reconstruction of the outcome of some of Plan's sponsorship stories in Italy: "Where are they now, yesterday's hungry children, the little victims of war and want who were rescued, healed, fed, protected by strangers' loving hands?"<sup>72</sup> Indeed, it is currently not yet possible to consult — directly and extensively — the documents produced by Plan during its years of activity in Italy, which I have here only partially used, and hence to gain a more critical and complex picture of the situation. We therefore have no choice but to rely on these pamphlets, which may of course lead to a partial and "partisan" vision.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, such a reading can be an interesting operation, obviously keeping in mind the peculiar, sometimes paternalistic language ("strangers' loving hands") used by the editors of the time and the fact that the chosen cases all represented — and necessarily so, given the eulogistic intentions — successful examples of Plan's programme.

Plan stopped making contributions to a Foster Child once it was able to provide for itself; in other words, when it finished its second cycle of studies, which could then already be around the age of 14, or found a job, which could

<sup>68</sup> *Plan is there today. In Italy, in 1947...*, in "Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962", Foster Parents' Plan Inc., 1962.

<sup>69</sup> *Plan is there today. In Italy, in 1947...*, in "Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962", Foster Parents' Plan Inc., 1962.

<sup>70</sup> *Plan is there today. In Italy, in 1947...*, picture caption, in "Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962", Foster Parents' Plan Inc., 1962.

<sup>71</sup> I consulted "Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962" and "Lifelines No. 2. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962" at the SWHA of Minneapolis: box 11, folder 11.09 and box 21, folder on Foster Parents' Plan, respectively.

<sup>72</sup> *Yesterday's Children*, in "Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962", Foster Parents' Plan Inc., 1962.

<sup>73</sup> Although the documents of the Foster Parents' Plan held at the University of Rhode Island, Library Special Collections and Archives, cover the entire chronological span of its presence in Italy, currently it is only possible to view those from the earliest years.

happen even earlier. This did not prevent the fact that, if a good relationship had been established with the Foster Parent, this relationship would continue even after the benefactor's financial aid had been transferred to a more impoverished or younger child. It could also happen that a Foster Child became so attached to director who visited it, or to the social worker who followed its case, that it stayed in contact even with them.<sup>74</sup> For the luckiest of the formerly sponsored children, the interest — albeit from a distance — of an American parent had meant hope after the war and the possibility of creating a new life for themselves; the Italian children were certainly and apparently grateful for this, and would continue to be so.

Anna, for example, was a young woman who had managed to fulfil her childhood dream of becoming a teacher thanks to her “adoptive father in America”. During the day, she taught primary school children, who often had to help their parents in the fields after school; in the evenings, she taught illiterate adults, who struggled with tiredness and sleep after a long day's work.

My great joy came at the end of the school year when all my children were promoted, and I saw on the faces of the adults the satisfaction which comes after winning a hard battle and they knew how to write and read.<sup>75</sup>

Domenica used to think she was living a fairy tale whenever she received a gift from America as a child; when she grew up, she graduated as a company secretary. Cesare, on the other hand, had been a frail, weak and sickly child, but he eventually became a sailor serving in the Italian navy.<sup>76</sup> Linotypist Bruno was orphaned at the age of 10, ending up in an institution with his brother:

Plan changed our lives. There was money each month, and the magnificent parcels of clothing, food and other useful items. I received lovely letters from my Foster Parents and their immense affection made me feel less alone. [...] When I left [the orphanage], I had a diploma as a typesetter.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, Carlo was a poor and malnourished 13-year-old boy when Foster Parents' Plan took up his case right after the end of the war. Once he left the programme, he joined the Air Force but soon realised that he was not suited for a military career; after much soul-searching, he decided to enter the seminary. In all those years, he had stayed in touch with Baccanelli. This is how Brother Carlo — now in his thirties — described his experience in a letter to her:

<sup>74</sup> *Yesterday's Children*, in “Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962”, Foster Parents' Plan Inc., 1962.

<sup>75</sup> *Anna Bielo, a Country School Teacher*, “Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962”.

<sup>76</sup> *Domenica Elena Peluso, an Expert Secretary e Seaman Cesare Del Grosso*, “Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962”.

<sup>77</sup> *Linotypist Bruno Battisti*, “Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962”.

I was 13 when I best remember Plan. Just after the war, at the end of [the] school year, I was asked to put on my best clothes to be photographed. I did not understand the significance this would have for me. [...] I had only what Plan gave me: in money, clothing, food. They even gave me toys and candy. When a package came, I was rich. I have never lost contact with Plan, [I] have even been a collaborator of its work, pointing out several pitiful cases. Through Plan I was able to feel the truth of the saying: "It is better to give than to receive." Above all, I saw the need in the world for fraternal charity. The Plan gifts were sent by the Divine Father, as they came across the sea, from people I did not know.<sup>78</sup>

All these testimonies underlined how Plan had helped Italian children and, despite their initial situation of poverty and hardship, enabled them to provide for themselves as well as to become productive members of society and active citizens.

One important point emerges from Brother Carlo's words, even if indirectly: the help had come from "across the ocean", from the United States. A similar message was quite important in the Cold War era if we bear in mind that, albeit briefly, Elma Baccanelli — the "first and only" director of Plan in Italy — had also worked for the USIS. This acronym indicated all the offices of the various agencies that, under the aegis of the State Department, dealt with political and cultural information from 1945 onwards.<sup>79</sup> The American system of communication and dissemination of propaganda, from the Second World War on and at least throughout the 1950s, was very advanced, and one of its main concerns was to convey a good self-image abroad. Other than the most obvious means of disseminating information, such as the press, radio or cinema, "interpersonal sources" like friends, relatives and acquaintances were still very important for a country like Italy,<sup>80</sup> especially if they had obtained a certain social success through education — something that could essentially be achieved through Plan's programme.

A young doctor, a future engineer and a radio operator: all had gone from being poor orphans with an uncertain future ahead to becoming professionals, thanks to their individual skills and abilities. They had achieved a secure position in life, but without ever forgetting to whom they owed their fortune.

<sup>78</sup> *A Boy Called Carlo*, "Lifelines. 25th Anniversary Year, 1962".

<sup>79</sup> In August 1953, President Eisenhower set up an independent agency, the United State Information Agency (USIA), which was to incorporate all information programmes; however, the USIS continued to refer to the various USIA offices located abroad. The Information Service had arrived in Italy with the Allied troops before the end of hostilities, as a department within the Office of War Information (OWI), which dealt specifically with propaganda and with the Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB), the Allied body in charge of conducting psychological warfare, but it only began to operate autonomously after the Liberation. See Simona Tobia, *Advertising America. The United States Information Service in Italy (1945-1956)*, Milan, LED, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> See Silvia Cassamagnaghi, *Immagini dall'America. Mass media e modelli femminili nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra. 1945-1960*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2007, pp. 21-44.

It made me see that there are good people who want to help us feel we are not alone, and who can give with all their souls.<sup>81</sup>

My Foster Parent taught me the goodness of people.<sup>82</sup>

While there is still so much discord in the world, Foster Parents' Plan endeavours to unite the different peoples of the world into one great family.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

From 1947 until 1969, Foster Parents' Plan supported 11,385 minors in Italy alone,<sup>84</sup> giving them opportunities that seemed almost unimaginable in the post-war years. While it is true that, from the first days of its activity in Spain and throughout the following years, Plan overtly maintained a completely neutral, impartial attitude, helping children in every part of the world without considering the religious faith or political affiliation of their parents,<sup>85</sup> the children benefiting from the programme inevitably became ideal examples of the goodness of the United States' social, administrative and international practices, at a time when it was essential for the Americans to demonstrate — even to the Allies — that their model was superior to the Soviet one.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, many American citizens were “run over” by the task of protecting the “free world”,<sup>87</sup> thanks to an unprecedented extension of the concept of “family”; supporting the projects of organisations helping children abroad meant that the Americans' daily lives came to include relationships that — at least in terms of belonging — went beyond the ties linked to their nation or family. Finally, it was not at all necessary for the adults and children involved in these long-distance adoptions to be fully aware of the political role they were playing or might play in the future: while they were probably far from sophisticated diplomatic actors, they were more or less involved in the battle against communism.

Unfortunately, the period taken into consideration here was necessarily, and inevitably, short.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, it was not possible to fully analyse the over

<sup>81</sup> *One of Tomorrow's Medics. He'll be a MD in 1962.* Alberto Lungaro, in “Lifelines No. 2, 25th Anniversary Year, 1962”.

<sup>82</sup> *A Future Engineer.* Ennio Ritossa, in “Lifelines No. 2, 25th Anniversary Year, 1962”.

<sup>83</sup> *I'm Not an Important Person.* Franco Stincheddu, in “Lifelines No. 2, 25th Anniversary Year, 1962”.

<sup>84</sup> Laura Asnaghi, *Il gran ritorno dei pionieri dell'adozione a distanza C'è ancora bisogno di noi*, in “la Repubblica”, Milan, 9 November 2012.

<sup>85</sup> S. Fieldston, *Little Cold Warriors*, cit., pp. 241 and 244-245.

<sup>86</sup> See Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons. The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

<sup>87</sup> S. Fieldston, *Little Cold Warriors*, cit., pp. 249-250.

<sup>88</sup> It will only be possible to make a real step forward when the materials of the Foster Parents Plan International: Italy, held at the University of Rhode Island Library, will become accessible.

twenty years of presence of Plan in Italy, the changes it underwent and the evolution of its programme. It would be interesting, for example, to examine the transition from individual aid to orphaned children and war victims to the more general and widespread support to families and communities. Another theme that is worth examining more in depth is the transition from policies of mere subsistence, implemented by providing only the essentials (i.e. food, shelter and primary health care), to the desire to support the emotional and intellectual development of the assisted children — especially within their family environment, which the donations had made more welcoming and safer — by virtue also of the organisation's growing interest in an education that could go beyond the primary school.<sup>89</sup>

Hence, we may only truly understand the programme's long-term evolution if we investigate these aspects in greater depth by going beyond the initial, even if essential, phases of settling in and settling down as well as some of the — positive — outcomes of individual stories. This will allow us to grasp the mechanisms and delicate balances of Plan's activities, especially in a country as politically complex as Italy, where competing forces co-existed and operated side by side.

<sup>89</sup> H. Dijsselbloem et al., *Child Sponsorship and Right-Based Interventions at Plan*, cit., pp. 135-136.