

A New Conception for Elda

“After 90 Years I will no longer celebrate my birth date. From now on I will only celebrate my conception date!”

Elda

These were the words which greeted Prof. Peter Fedor-Freybergh, Dr. Lilian Beattie (UK) and myself as we arrived for a visit to Elda Mazzochi Scarzella at the Villaggio Della Madre E Dell Fanciullo in Milan Italy.

In some issues of this Journal we have been saddened to read of the death of one of our compatriots. It is particularly appropriate for our Journal to honor the special birth-dates of our members. In 1993 we ‘tipped the hat’ to our esteemed President Prof. Rudolf Klimek on reaching his 60th year and to Prof. Derek Gupta on his 65th. It is a joy in this issue to extend congratulations to several individuals who have achieved ‘timestones’ on journeys which started at conception. A Grand Dame in the truest sense, it is a distinct pleasure to congratulate Elda Mazzochi Scarzella on her 90th year marking 60 years of service to young mothers and babies in Milan.

At the 1989 ISPPM Congress in Jerusalem Elda (I will use only her first name in the deepest respect one has for an honored elder) was the first recipient of the ISPPM Humanitarian Award which has since carried her name.

Elda still remembers and delights in telling about her first baby catching in Sardinia in 1922. Although it had a profound impact on her she had no idea that it would be the catalyst for a life of birthing service to humanity spanning almost three quarters of a century. During our visit, after an exquisitely prepared chicken and artichoke lunch by her 83 old housekeeper, from Sardinia no less, Elda brought out a very large bright green case of photographs which she emphatically plopped to the floor of her sitting room. Elda showed us photographs of her distinguished Milanese grandparents and parents. On the coffee table were albums of photos as well. Besides her own book LIBERAZIONE she showed us her listing in a volume honoring this century’s most accomplished Milanese citizens. We were looking for a photo which would best depict the character which Elda presented to the world. Actually, the one chosen was not from her past but a recent one which explodes with all her vital force, determination and great good humour. But the pictures did help us to get a wider vision of this amazing woman who is mother, grandmother and great grandmother to so many she has loving touched.

It was in 1932 that Elda became aware of the incredible tragedy of unwed child mothers in a culture politically and religiously totally intolerant and condemning of mothers 11–12–13–14 year old. Officially, either incest did not happen

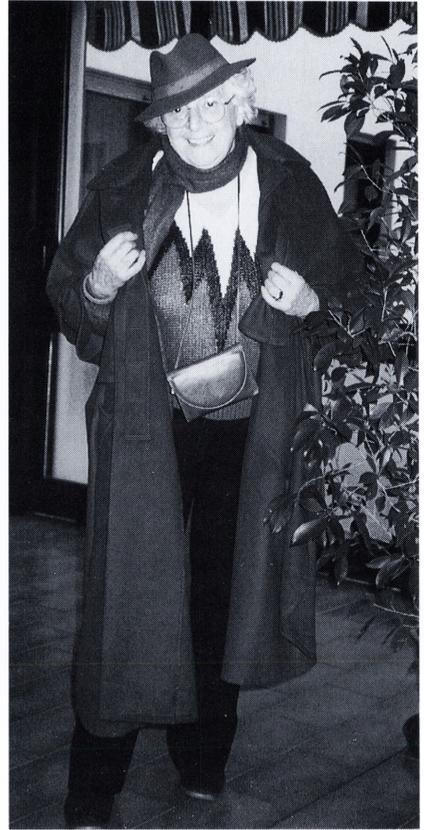
or even if there was a pregnancy it must have be the sinful girl's fault. With her compassion and rage aroused, Elda was determined that these children denied and abandoned by State and Church, often sexually abused by relatives, deserved to be cared for and nurtured. Her loving embrace also encompassed children whose fathers had been deported during the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini; children who were not only living with the fear of their father's deaths but who also suffered the trauma of being confined to inhumane state institutions.

When World War II swept through Italy, Elda's outrage for intolerance, persecution and death naturally led her into the Italian resistance. She assisted many Jewish refugees to escape from Nazi annihilation. With 'LIBERAZIONE of Milan on 25 April 1945' came a new challenge. All this is described and pictured in her book by that name. Pregnant girls and women returned from concentration camps but refused to enter county dormitories which were simply another kind of concentration camp. These women

wanted a room where they could live their motherhood. At the same time, Elda found girls who had been raped by both occupying and liberating troops cast out into the gutters of Milan by condemning families. Still the authorities and the Church refused to acknowledge such pregnancies. It was through Elda's unceasing efforts that space was found on the grounds of the University Hospital in the centre of Milan. Eventually, six small huts were built in the garden there.

With the same determination which served her in the war resistance, Elda was a solitary force fomenting a medical revolution; gently, by her presence, impinging nobly upon a system of medical dominance. The new force quietly asserting itself before, during and after her children's deliveries, when challenged by doctors identified itself as being, "... here to live with their pain and their joy!"

It was not long before morally righteous citizens rose up against her. After all, since these child-mothers had conceived in sin wherever they lived would be tainted and the reputation of the University Hospital must be upheld. Elda's little project of humanity was expelled. But even more sinister were the grandparents who because of their staunch religious beliefs rejected the pregnant children, and their mother's who said, "Give your child in adoption and you can come back to my house!" Elda knew she had to provide a permanent, independent secure home for her thrice victimised children.



Elda's reputation as a supporter for child-mothers began to spread internationally. In 1951 during a leadership tour to the United States, Elda was approached by desperate mothers appealing for her to help them get the addresses of children they had given up for adoption at birth. By USA law parents were denied information regarding the babies whom they had conceived and nourished for nine months and had never been allowed to see.

Returning to Milan in 1952, Elda developed seven residential courses under the auspices of the American Friends Committee. It was in 1957, twelve years after the Liberation and the conception of the Villaggio vision that a permanent location took root. With the inspiration of her architect son, what many said was an impossible dream started to take physical form. On land made available by Q.T.8, the local government a self-contained village developed. An administration building opened to gardens and "home" – six individual flats and a suite for birthing in a homelike atmosphere. This pleasant room now includes a large tub for underwater birth if the mothers wish.

What is evident at every turn at the Villaggio is love. Newly arrived pregnant girls are paired with girls who are nearer to term. Two girls share a clean, bright bedroom – their space opens to a common or shared kitchen, dining, school – playroom. Safeness and security abound and support the basic theme of love.

In Elda's vision, the roommates support each other. When the new baby arrives both girls learn to care for it. In a common sense mutuality; the new mother receives help, and the other girl experiences hands on how to take care of a new born infant before her own arrives. Babies are never separated from their mothers. Marriages of convenience are discouraged. But where possible school boy fathers are encouraged to visit, learn about their baby and learn emotional support to the mothers.

Basic education continues but also includes how to take care of herself and her expected baby. Each mother's schooling also can include her choice of craft training which will make her capable of supporting herself and child when they are ready to leave one to three years after the birth. A new program offering computer training to villagers is envisioned as soon as computers can be donated. Through affiliation with the Provincial Social Services, the Villaggio is now able to be "home" to older rejected teenage girls and even young women with other children who need a safe haven.

In 1995 the Villaggio will officially celebrate 50 golden years. Plans are underway to acknowledge the medical and educational professionals who have donated their services over the years. Families and individuals who have donated funds will also be honored. Many studies have been done over the decades by universities and individual scientists. But they have never been co-ordinated. Prof. Peter Fedor-Freybergh and myself are organising a Research Centre within the Villaggio to study this unique and amazing population which now exists over several generations. Dr. Anne Milardi a close associate of Elda's who has worked with the Villaggio for over 20 years and has been running a similar program in Turin will direct that project. An oral history research program under Prof. John-Raphael Staude (USA/UK) is being set up. And, a study on creativity within the

Villaggio population will be researched by Dr. Lilian Beattie (UK). Several other programs by supporters of the Villaggio are being established.

Perhaps, what Elda's vision has created is successful because it supports the most practical aspects of prebirth, birth & after birth ideas. Does it work? Here are the words of Prof. Sirtori, consulting gynaecologist to the Villaggio: "In spite of the particular psychological conditions in which our girls are arriving to the delivery, also considering the modest cultural level of many of them, in all cases where I assisted until now, it has been my experience that they all had a serene and joyful behavior with the delivery; labor decidedly shorter than normal and even shorter if the partner is present; and without any pathological complications. So, we conclude that besides a good preparation not to be disregarded, the environment and the atmosphere are playing a very important role in conditioning the woman during her labor and later on in breast feeding, too. It is obvious that in order to guarantee security to the labor assisted in this way, the doctor and midwife must have a good knowledge and experience in assistance of 'old fashioned deliveries', without the aid of too sophisticated means and with external support from hospital ready to receive immediately possible complications . . . Our staff pediatricist is also present at the birth in our home way."

Personally, one of the most meaningful moments of my life was when an 12 year old girl sitting next to me at lunch in her "home" trustingly confided in me that something so exciting and unfathomable was about to happen to her in two weeks that she was just "a little scared". Because of Elda Mazzocchi Scarzella her fear as for so many young mothers is being transcended through development of self-acceptance, self-love and self-confidence.

It is impossible to return to Elda all the sacrifice, the love and protection her life continues to embody within the Villaggio. That return can only be shown as the Villaggio continues to serve within her vision. Elda's conception day is 15 March. The most wonderful gift she could receive is knowing that the Villaggio Della Madre E Dell Fanciullo will continue as long again as she has and that Villaggios can be established all around the world where children and young women are sexually abused. Any birthday donations of funds or services ISPPM members would like to donate to the 50th Anniversary Fund may be sent to Elda at the Villaggio at Via Goya n. 60, 20148 Milano Q.T.8. She can be faxed +39 2 498-9145. Suggestions for research grants information may be made directly to Prof. Fedor-Freybergh in Stockholm.

Dear Elda,

May the next 90 years be the fulfilment of all your dreams!

Much Peace & Much Love!

John-Richard & Troye Turner