

Orthopedics between Milan and Mexico: A case from the late 19th century

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Abstract. A folder titled “Rovatti” was found among the documentation of the private collection of Enrico Rosmini in Milan. This folder contained correspondence related to the *Pio Istituto dei Rachitici* in Milan, a school dedicated to the care of children with skeletal deformities. These documents provide insight into the care of the patients of the Institute through a personal lens, that of the experience of a father struggling with his efforts to achieve financial security. The documents presented in this short paper constitute additional information to better reconstruct the history of Milanese medicine in a crucial period of transition towards modernity, the so-called *belle époque*.

Key words: Pio Istituto dei Rachitici – Milano, emigrazione italiana in Messico, Gaetano Rovatti

Introduction

Among the documentation preserved in the private collection of the lawyer Enrico Rosmini in Milan (1828-1898) is a folder titled “Rovatti”. The lawyer Enrico Rosmini was one of the founders of the *Scuola pei Rachitici* (1) in Milan, together with Gaetano Pini (1846-1887) and Giuseppe Sacchi (1804-1891). Inaugurated in 1874, the school soon took on the characteristics of an orthopedic institute. The first founder, Rosmini, may be remembered as a great expert in copyright law, theatrical law, annotator of codes, and founder of SIAE (*Società Italiana degli Autori e degli Editori* – the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers). He was among the promoters of the *Riformatori Marchiondi-Spagliardi* of the Province of Milan. He was also a staunch cremationist (2). His brother Giovanni Rosmini (1832-1896) founded the *Pio Istituto Oftalmico* (Pious Ophthalmic Institute) in Milan in 1874 (3). In some ways, Gaetano Pini’s fate could be called curious. In Comandini and Monti’s

very detailed volume which alleges to analyze, day by day, the events of the 19th century (4), there is no mention of his death. In the volume, under the date of August 26, 1873, the initiative of the *Scuola pei Rachitici* is mentioned, accompanied by the iconographic reproduction based on the photograph that was distributed after Pini’s death. In the authoritative biographical repertory edited by the Italian Encyclopedia Institute (*Treccani*), the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, there is no biographical entry dedicated to the distinguished doctor from Livorno/Milan. Celebrated in life, regardless of the judgment on the person and his works, Pini seems to have been quickly shrouded in a dense historiographical fog after his death. News about him is to be found among scattered contributions in various venues (5-16). Giuseppe Sacchi, the last founder of the *Scuola pei Rachitici*, is known for the establishment in Milan of the first Kindergartens as early as 1836.

The above-mentioned folder, titled “Rovatti”, and found in the documentation of Rosmini’s private

collection, contains correspondence consisting of a stamped paper document, dated Genoa, March 15, 1886, and five letters, dated Genoa, March 27, 1886; Genoa, July 31, 1886; Genoa, January 13, 1887; Mexico, January 24, 1887 (this is an obvious dating error, as the crossing to Mexico lasted about a month); and Mexico, January 24, 1888. Overall, the documentation contains information regarding payment for unspecified treatment administered at the *Pio Istituto dei Rachitici* in Milan.

This file is of specific interest for the history of the Milan Orthopedic Institution as well as of general historical interest, as it concerns one of the protagonists, albeit controversial, of Italian (and Trentino) emigration to Mexico: Gaetano Rovatti.

Italian emigration to Mexico in the late 19th century: The role of Gaetano Rovatti

Mexico was not affected by mass emigration from the Italian peninsula or from Italian-speaking territories not belonging to the Kingdom of Italy (i.e., Trentino, Italian Switzerland). In fact, only a few thousand people reached Mexico, coming mainly from Trentino, Veneto, and Lombardy (1858-1924). They founded few agricultural colonies, but some settlements are still inhabited by descendants of the first settlers. The literature concerning Veneto and Trentino emigration to Mexico is well established. It ranges from general framing works (17-18), even comparative (19), to academic dissertations (20-22). There is no shortage of other specific works on Veneto (23) and Trentino (24-25) emigration to Mexico.

How did entrepreneur Gaetano Rovatti, who operated in Livorno, fit into this context? To understand his involvement, we must first go back to the emigration project. There were four steps to conduct this successful emigration to Mexico. The first consisted of entering into a specific agreement with the Mexican authorities, which presupposed a series of contacts and negotiations with the diplomatic authorities of the two countries. The second stage involved recruiting emigrants; in this regard, it should be noted that the Mexican authorities

required people from the northern regions of the Italian peninsula who were experts in agriculture. The third stage required the organization of the trip from Italy to Mexico. Finally, the fourth step was to distribute the settlers in the lands assigned to them (22).

Although Mexico was not affected by a major flow of emigrants, this was not always the case with other countries (Argentina, Brazil). The organization of emigration with a direct naval line between Livorno and Veracruz could interfere with the large movements of emigrants that were based on companies operating from the port of Genoa. The transport of emigrants was a lucrative trade, and the organizers defended their portions of the market by any means, licit or illicit. For the Genoese shipowners, a new emigration hub in Livorno appeared as dangerous competition. Rovatti managed to obtain a transport contract, and in 1882 a first shipment of just over 400 settlers successfully departed from Livorno. The activities of Rovatti and his representatives had been particularly effective in Trentino, thanks in part to targeted interventions in the local press, coupled with the dissemination of propaganda pamphlets. Asserting a rights issue, he also organized a more substantial second shipment of settlers.

One of the stipulations featuring in the contract with the Mexican authorities was a government reimbursement, related to the gratuity of the sea voyage for the settlers. However, trip organizers sought compensation from passengers on their ships. Rovatti did not give up this practice, but it represented the end of his activity as his transportation contracts were no longer renewed (22).

Material and methods

Analysis of the documentation

A brief description of the documents, appropriately annotated, will now be laid out.

Document no. 1

Dated Genoa, 1886, March 15.

Commitment to pay, by December 31, 1886, for the sum of £1284 and 40 cents, with interest at 6%, effective October 1, 1885, for “care given to my child Ida”.

This document gives us an account of the characteristics of the financing of the *Pio Istituto dei Rachitici*. In addition to donations (the characteristic of *Ente Morale* or Moral Entity allowed the acceptance of testamentary bequests), in order to be able to guarantee assistance to the needy, wealthy people were asked to pay a daily fee (1). We are not aware of the condition treated, nor the duration of the treatment, but orthopedic care could involve prolonged stays; the amount due was significant, which suggests a prolonged duration of the stay or a particular complexity of the case.

The document also tells us that Rovatti’s activity had moved to Genoa: evidently the establishment of a Livorno-based emigration hub had failed.

Document no. 2

Dated Genoa, 1886, March 27.

Accompanying letter, in which Rovatti sends the payment bond dated March 15, 1886, to accountant Ferrabini of the *Pio Istituto dei Rachitici*.

This document makes several interesting notes. Rovatti was unable to guarantee a repayment divided into monthly installments. Evidently, he must have been requested to do so, but he believed he could settle the debt in advance, provided he came into possession of sums he would have had to resort to legal acts to collect.

We also got news about the little patient: “Ida is doing well and tells me she remembers her. She studies and always gets a grade 9 or 10 and works. She goes to school from 9 to 12 then at home she works”. In addition to being a confirmation that the patient’s hospitalization must have been prolonged, this reminds us that care was not only medical or surgical, but also pedagogical (including age-appropriate professional training).

Document no. 3

Dated Genoa, 1886, July 31.

Rovatti writes to Ferrabini reconfirming the due date of the debt and pointing out a partnership with another company “whose operations are insured” (Figure 1).

It is likely that Rovatti had not made any payments. Notes of a personal nature make us aware that Rovatti had another daughter, older than Ida: “Ida is well, she passed her exams very well I think with 9/10. She is now taking sea baths and always remembers the institute, the Lady Director, Sir Pini and you with true affection, and also told me to ask you on behalf of my eldest daughter to present their greetings to all, joining my compliments”.

Document no. 4

Dated Genoa, 1887, January 13.

Rovatti writes to Ferrabini complaining of his poor health. By January or early February, he counted on going to Milan and, with the help of lawyer Alessi, to “settle this painful matter satisfactorily”. The deadline for the payment had passed, and the case was entrusted to the lawyers of the *Pio Istituto dei Rachitici*. As for the little patient, she always enjoyed good health.

Document no. 5

Dated Mexico, 1888, January 24.

Rovatti writes to Rosmini that he had asked lawyer Alessi to assure Gaetano Pini that the debt would be paid. Upon arriving in Mexico, he began his work, consisting of exploring land. He mentions that only in the last period had he omitted payments. He had thus reached Mexico, “with the intention of honoring some commitments and making a position for my daughters”. Finally, he writes about his friend, Gaetano Pini, “sadly taken from us too soon”.

Rovatti’s departure for Mexico must have occurred in the early summer of 1887 at the latest. Evidently, he still counted on remaining included in the activities related to Italian emigration. No family-related mentions appear in this letter.

Document no. 6

Dated Mexico, 1887 [recte 1888], January 24.

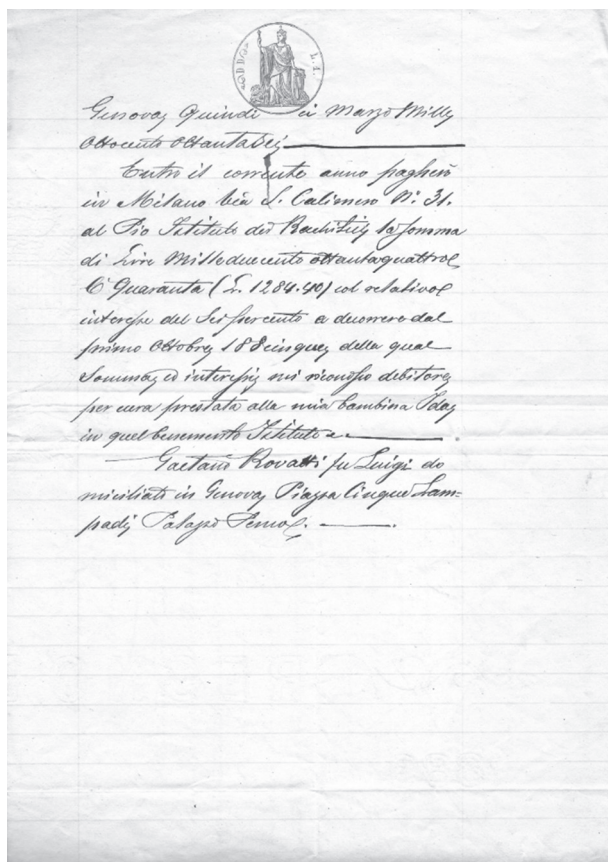


Figure 1. Rovatti's bond. Genoa, March 15, 1886.

Rovatti writes to Alessi, complaining about the harsh living conditions to which he is subjected. Rovatti believes that the threat of resorting to consular avenues to recover credit is impracticable because the expenses of obtaining the sums often exceed the amount of the sums themselves, as had happened to him. Finally, he complains that businesses do not see the presence of Italians and that Italian consuls do not protect them.

This letter, sent on the same date as the previous one, contains more details about Rovatti's situation. The most interesting ones relate to the description of his activity and business situation, which are worth quoting in full:

"[...] Imagine that I am on Horseback all day when I am out, and one sleeps on the land and in the Cabanas of the Indios eating corn *tortiglii* and drinking

water mixed with *aguardiente*. My children stay at the Capital and Prassede, wife of Brizi, goes to the house day and night to keep them company. Health is very good [...]"

"[...] Tomorrow I leave again and will be absent about a month. The trade here is all in the hands of the Germans - French - Swiss and Spanish. Not counting the Americans. What about our consuls? They think of monopolizing the trade by competing with some brave Italian importers, with other foreign products, and perhaps forging the factory marks to better succeed. I say this because of a trial recently done but faded. Better that they not be there than to be represented by such Rogue. I take exception to Berardi of Monterey who is a gentleman [...]"

The Consul of the Kingdom of Italy mentioned was Reinaldo Berardi from Brescia. He arrived in Monterey in 1848, was a prominent Regiomontan citizen, and achieved prominent positions in the economic and industrial development of the city (26).

Conclusion

Was Rovatti's debt settled? The non-accessibility of the documentation kept at the Gaetano Pini Orthopedic Institute in Milan prevents us from obtaining further data to resolve the question, although there is no evidence of a positive conclusion to the affair. However, the documentation received by us does not cease to hold value. It confirms how every affair, every story, every micro-story, which often eludes scientific representations can give us insights and reflection. In our case, the hopes, the illusions of a father (the existence of a mother is never mentioned) grappling with his daughter's illness emerge alongside his evidently frustrated attempts to achieve economic security. By reflection, even in seemingly marginal documentation, the characteristics of the assistance promoted by Gaetano Pini are revealed: attention to the "last", those most in need of care.

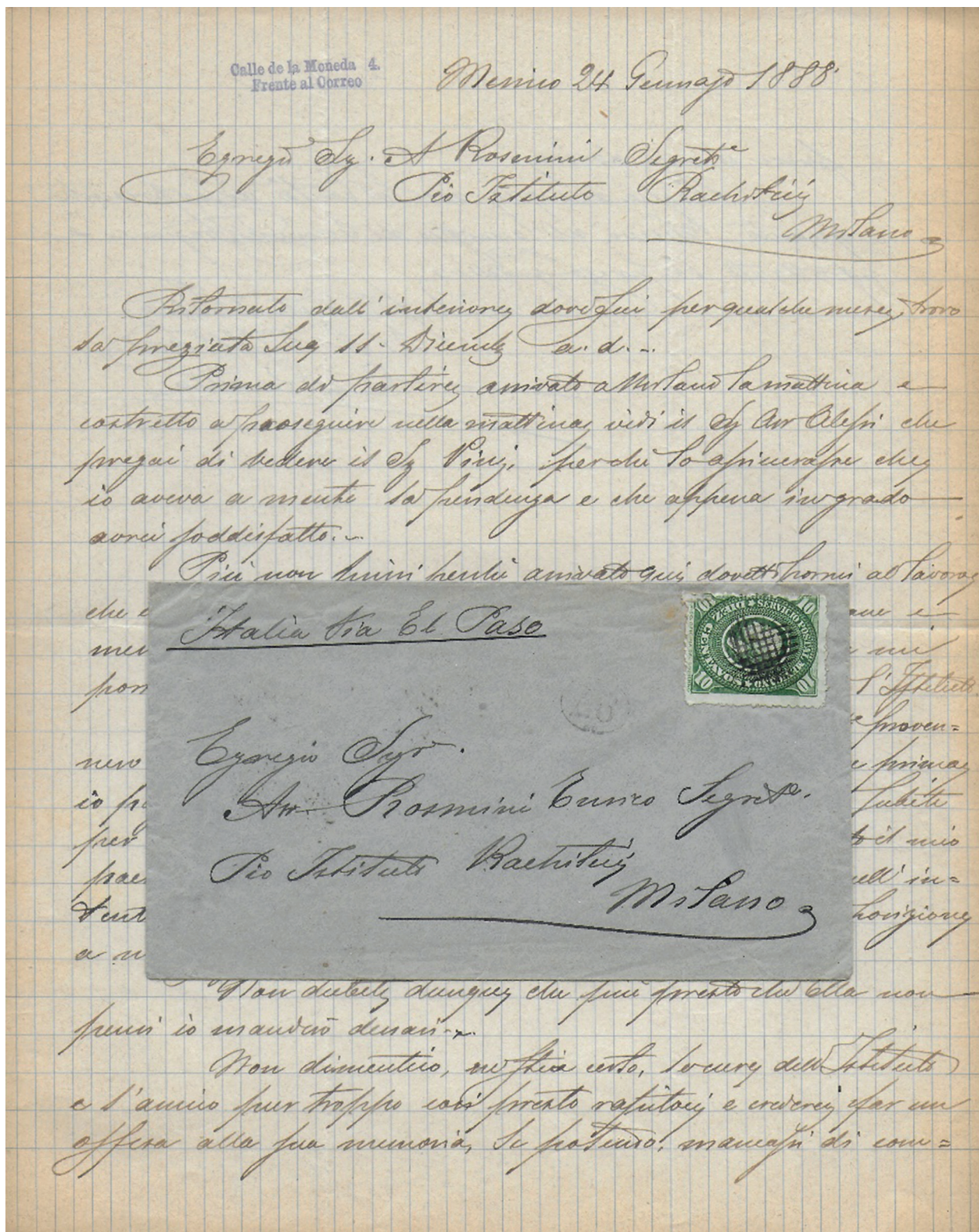


Figure 2. Letter from Rovatti to Rosmini (with envelope). Mexico, January 24, 1888.

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