

An outstanding female figure in the history of occupational health: Ersilia Majno Bronzini

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KEY WORDS

History; women labour; child labour; Majno Bronzini

SUMMARY

Background: Starting with the obituary "Ersilia Majno Bronzini: an outstanding female figure in Occupational Health," probably written by Luigi Devoto and published in the journal *La Medicina del Lavoro* (1933), a reappraisal is made of Majno Bronzini's contribution to occupational health. **Methods:** Most references were collected from the archives of the journal *Il Lavoro* (1901), the archives of the association "Union of Women", the periodical founded by Majno Bronzini (1899) and other material. **Results:** Majno Bronzini's selected published papers (1895, 1900, 1902) on the working conditions of women and child labour proposing a national occupational health law were found. The importance of a women's network for occupational health is also shown in Majno Bronzini's correspondence with Anna Celli Frantzel and Maria Montessori. In 1902 Angelo Celli officially congratulated Majno Bronzini's (and Anne Kuliscioff's) efforts to promulgate the first law on women and child labour during his speech before the Italian Parliament, published by *Il Lavoro*. Majno Bronzini and Nina Rignano Sullam were the only two women participating in the First International Congress on Occupational Health in Milan (1906). The correspondence between Majno Bronzini and Devoto (1901-1933) and Devoto's formal acknowledgement of Majno Bronzini (1910) when inaugurating the new "Clinica del Lavoro" institute is well documented. **Conclusions:** Majno Bronzini dedicated a significant part of her life to occupational health, together with Anna Celli Frantzel and Maria Montessori along with many others. This research shows how important her contribution was to occupational health development.

RIASSUNTO

«Una straordinaria figura femminile nella storia della medicina del lavoro: Ersilia Majno Bronzini». A partire dalla commemorazione "Ersilia Majno Bronzini: una Benemerita della Medicina del Lavoro" pubblicata su questa rivista (1933), attribuita a Luigi Devoto, si ripercorre il contributo di Ersilia Majno Bronzini per il miglioramento delle condizioni di lavoro, in particolare delle donne, private di una legislazione specifica e sfruttate nei tempi, nei modi e nei salari. Le relazioni nei diversi Congressi, la rivista *l'Unione femminile*, il carteggio con Luigi Devoto sono analizzati nel dettaglio per esplicitare il lavoro della Majno Bronzini per la medicina del lavoro e per una concreta azione di prevenzione dei rischi.

Pervenuto il 3.6.2010 - Accettato il 24.9.2010

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This paper was in part presented at the 4th International Congress on History of Occupational and Environmental Health 19-22 June, 2010, San Francisco

A physician wanting to become a historian is as dangerous as a historian wanting to become a physician. Nonetheless, in recent years, many scientists, physicians and others interested in health and disease, have been encouraged to analyze the past...."

Giovanni Berlinguer (4)

In 1933 Luigi Devoto wrote the obituary on the death of Ersilia Majno Bronzini (1859-1933) in the journal *La Medicina del Lavoro* citing her as "an outstanding female figure in Occupational Health" (9). Majno Bronzini was a nineteenth century lady, competent and passionate, who played a leading role in many conflicts to obtain better living and working conditions for the undernourished, illiterate population in Milan and Italy. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century she made important contributions whose significance needs to be better known, particularly in occupational health.

A WOMAN'S BIOGRAPHY

Being the daughter of a merchant in financial difficulties in Milan and two other sons to educate, Majno Bronzini could not afford an education. However she soon managed to teach herself and began participating in setting up a number of associations with the sole purpose of improving the living and working conditions of women, i.e., the less protected members of the working class (26). Her engagement was reinforced by her marriage to Luigi Majno (1852-1915), also acknowledged following his premature death in *Il Lavoro* (10). He was a prominent lawyer, dedicated to the poor, a socialist member of Parliament and University Professor in Pavia teaching Criminal Law.

The social activity of Majno Bronzini started with midwifery assistance in Milan, also helping mothers of illegitimate children. At that time she met other women, such as the physician Anne Kuliscioff and Edvige Gessner Vonwiller. In 1898,

together with these two women, Alessandrina Ravizza and Ada Negri, she set up a committee for helping rioters sent to prison after protesting against the increase in the price of bread.

The riot was repressed by General Bava Beccaris with more than eighty protesters left dead. Majno Bronzini, via the "pro-imprisoned" Committee, collected funds by selling the paintings of artists, such as Giuseppe Mentessi, Pietro Chiesa, Emilio Longoni, who participated in the defense of the poor by portraying their living conditions in their art.

Majno Bronzini became a member of the Mutual Aid Association, for the assistance and education of working women, founded by Laura Solera Mantegazza (1813-1873), mother of Paolo Mantegazza, physician and anthropologist of the University of Pavia.

Majno Bronzini dedicated herself particularly to improving the working conditions of dressmakers, girls called "piscinine" (meaning "very small" in the dialect of Milan). Pietro Chiesa, who opened a design school for these little girls, described them as follows: "*In Milan they called them "piscinine", little working women, apprentices of dressmaking establishments, fashion warehouses; small sales assistants carrying packages, boxes, and baskets, sometimes oversized for that little body which is bent over and twisted by the effort. We are speaking of little girls from six to fifteen years old who work as little dressmakers in embroidery shops*" (8). The "piscinine" of dressmaking and fashion shops were paid a wage of 20 to 50 lira cents for 11 to 14 hours work per day. On 23 June 1902, 250 girls organized a strike. They asked for a minimum wage of 50 lira cents, extra pay for overtime, a limit of ten hours per day, weight regulation for the packages they had to handle, and the abolition of domestic service at the employers' houses on Sundays!

The "Unione Femminile" (Union of Women) (UF), founded in Milan on 28 December 1899, thanks to the efforts of Majno Bronzini, Nina Rignano Sullam, Ada Negri, Jole Bersellini Bellini, Alessandrina Ravizza, Edvige Vonwiller Gessner, Adele Riva, Antonietta Pisa Rizzi, and Rebecca Calderini, supported the "piscinine" strike and "piscinine" became supporters of the "Unione fem-

minile". Majno Bronzini wrote an article in the periodical *The Union of Women* in admiration of "*the surprising strike of the piscinine*" (17). Education for women, care in motherhood and infancy, work and legal self-help were the UF's main arms against marital rule established by law.

Three years later (1902) the UF became a National Association with new branches throughout Italy. Among these the Rome Branch was started by Sibilla Aleramo (Rina Faccio) and Anna Celli Frantzel, wife of Angelo Celli (hygienist, malariologist, anthropologist). Anna Celli Frantzel and Majno Bronzini shared the same engagement as testified in their correspondence up to 1925 (23). The main UF activity in Rome was the promotion of schooling and the fight against malaria in the Roman countryside and the Pontino marshland. A Committee was organized with the generous contribution of the writer Giovanni Cena, the painters Giacomo Balla, Duilio Cambelotti, and Alessandro Marcucci. Anna Celli Frantzel writes in her autobiography (1944), signed with a pen-name, "*Destiny decided that a friend from Milan should spend winter in Rome because she could not live, at least for a while, in her native city where she had lost her beloved youngest daughter. In Rome she asked for work so as to do something enduring. Miss Celli asked her to dedicate herself to teaching in the city but also to the poor "guitti" of the countryside, and Ersilia Majno accepted with joy*" (13).

Maria Montessori's method was later applied in the Pontino Marshland schools with Montessori's financial support. The struggle against malaria and illiteracy were two sides of the same problem (21).

Later on, Maria Montessori corresponded with Majno Bronzini saying, "*I have received the journal of the Union of Women where, in the chronicle of the unforgettable Congress in Milan (Author's Note: probably the First Congress on Women's Practical Activities, held in Milan in May 1908) I have read flattering appreciations addressed to my person. I am truly confused and I do not know how to thank you for such kindness. Please take me into account as a subscriber of the journal that is very interesting in all its parts, edited with simple and up-to-date issues*" (24).

REPORT PRESENTED AT THE CONGRESS ON "WORK ACCIDENTS IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HYGIENE, THE WORK OF WOMEN, CHILD LABOUR AND COMPULSORY EDUCATION" (1895)

In the year 1895 the newly set up Trade Union Association in Milan organized a Congress on "*Work accidents in relationship with hygiene, working women, child labour, and compulsory education*". At this Congress, Majno Bronzini presented "The Report on the Work of Women" (16) and Osvaldo Gnocchi Viani, founder of the Trade Union Headquarters and trade unionist of the printers, presented a paper on "Child Labour".

Majno Bronzini collected the statistical data produced by the factory inspectors using a scientific approach. She argued the need for Parliamentary action to limit the exploitation of women. She claimed that the exploitation of women and children was due to the use of automatic machinery and the fact that Italy, *although employing the highest number of women and children*, had not passed any protection laws. She argued that in England a law existed, the Factory Act (1844), thanks to the efforts of Sir Robert Peel, providing some protection to women and children workers.

She discussed the census data collected in 1881 with the purpose of drafting legislation on working women (Minister Lacava), which showed that 1,601,669 women were employed in industry (mainly textile, clothing, building and maintenance of houses and roads) 153,185 of whom were aged 9 to 14 years old (Italian official statistics data of the year 1880). "*Capitalism may exploit a woman till poverty removes all possibility of becoming a conscious creature; she is simply a machine producing work: women are used mostly to increase prostitution*". After the description of the realistic scenario of the exploitation of women, Majno Bronzini advocated a law that would allow employment only over 12 years of age and with a medical certificate, the prohibition of working underground, in tunnels, quarries and mines for children under 15 years old, and maternity leave of four weeks after giving birth. The law was to be applied only to enterprises with more than five workers. A special commission whose members were identified by the Trade

Unions, the Mutual Cooperative Company, and the Society of Mutual Aid, was to oversee its application.

In this report Majno Bronzini summarized the main steps leading to the proposal of a law: the first petition of the General Association of Italian printers in Rome in September 1875, the first law prohibiting child labour for both genders under nine years old in 1886 and, in February 1886, the first discussion in the Parliamentary Agenda of a Law regulating the work of women and also considering "the unhygienic work in the rice fields". The Congress, taking into account all the arguments and the statistical data produced by Majno Bronzini, decided to sponsor the petition for a law for working women.

The Union of Women later published a collection of papers related to the many initiatives supporting the law entitled "Towards a Law on the Work of Women and Child Labour". The cover was "Panem Nostrum Quotidianum", painted by Giuseppe Mentessi (25).

REPORT ON THE WORK OF WOMEN (1900)

The National Congress of the Mutual Aid Societies was held in Milan on 29-30 June 1900, with 872 societies participating. The General Association of Working Women of Milan appealed to all the working women societies to participate in order to set up an Italian Federation. Majno Bronzini, still fighting to achieve the goal of having a law passed in favour of working women, presented a second paper on the work of women (15) which expanded on the previous paper of 1895, recommending an increase in the participation of women in the Mutual Aid societies and in society generally. She underlined the role of women teaching (30,672 versus 19,376 men) and the published official yearly data in Lombardy. In the year 1880 Lombardy reported more women working than men (78,743 versus 24,438), in the same situation as the Province of Milan in 1893 (74,793 versus 67,561 men). Silk, cotton, linen and canvas industries employed many women and children although "the salaries of the working women are always less for

the same jobs". Majno Bronzini presented numerous charts showing the differences in wages between men and women in the spinning and weaving industries, etc. She described the working conditions in the Province of Pavia as "7000 women employed in the rice fields with poor wages and deadly working conditions" as well as many industrial sectors in cities such as Milan, Vicenza, Bologna, Novara, and Venice. Those unhealthy working conditions were to become one of the topics in the correspondence between Majno Bronzini and Luigi Devoto that started two years later at the end of 1902. "Among illnesses... those which I consider urgent because of their consequences, are those of women working in the rice fields. Poor girls from my mountains of Liguria! If you could only see them leaving on the 10th of July! What a sight!" thus Devoto wrote in his first reply to Majno Bronzini (Letter dated 4 December, 1901) (19).

Majno Bronzini listed the causes of such a high rate of employment of women: 1) the same job paid less; 2) women are patient and do not strike because they are less organized 3) no law protects them nor limits their exploitation.

"Women are exposed to occupational illnesses classified by engineer Belloc (3) as: continuous movement of the body, repetition of the same movement, obligation to remain sitting or standing in a fixed position, constant attention due to the machinery". Majno Bronzini adds inhalation of dust, staying many hours in a closed environment, sometimes exceedingly hot and humid, hands immersed in boiling water (working silk), unhealthy fumes from canvas, linen, tobacco leaves, and phosphorus. She also described "Pneumonia cotonneuse", deformation of upper limbs, death from tuberculosis, chlorosis, a kind of anaemia of young girls, *pellagra*. Majno Bronzini did not forget to mention lead and other metal poisonings due to mercury, arsenic, copper, carbon disulfide, phosphorus, and nicotine, stressing their impact on pregnant women and their offspring. She reported the risks in women working in match factories: "Poisoning by phosphorus produces (in addition to neonatal death) chronic periostitis in 11-12% of the women". Among the causes of neonatal death she described the one-third higher mortality of illegitimate children compared with legitimate off-

spring due to congenital syphilis and lack of nutrition and treatment.

The Minister Lacava, cited in the Report, presented a new proposal of a law for women and child labour before Parliament on 23 November 1893 but Majno Bronzini considered the proposal limited because it applied only to minors. She proposed to the Congress to demand a limit of eight hours work per day with 2 hours interval, the same wages for men and women, prohibition of working at night, on public holidays, during the six weeks before giving birth and in the unhealthy and dangerous working conditions. She appealed to the Municipalities to set up Committees of men and women inspectors selected among workers with a mandate to investigate and impose fines. In the case of non-compliance the benefits accruing would be assigned to the education of workers' children in trade schools.

To summarize, the two papers (1895, 1900) showed how many women were working, even more than men, often girls paid less and in unhealthy working conditions, even worse when they were pregnant. Work, health, poverty, motherhood, statistics, society, and legislation were the main issues Majno Bronzini presented with scientific competence and passion. Her efforts and her labour had positive after-effects.

The same year, Anne Kuliscioff drew up a petition for a law at the Congress of the National Socialist Party in Rome (8-10 September 1900) that was later accepted (22).

REPORT BY ANGELO CELLI ON THE LAW ON WORKING WOMEN AND CHILD LABOUR (1902)

The unsustainable situation of women and girls, the enormous efforts of the Union of Women (Unione Femminile) and the commitment of the Socialist Party lead to the submission of the law to the Italian Parliament.

On 18 March 1902 Angelo Celli spoke before Parliament to support the law on "The work of women and child labour". Luigi Devoto's journal *Il Lavoro* published his speech (7). Celli recalled that the law had been promised since 1879 and the first proposal appeared only in 1893; he said "Today we

have the law and we have the Government to thank for it" but also "We have to thank those good souls who from the outside have urged us to have this discussion (.....) and I believe that it is my duty to acknowledge two noble minded women: Ersilia Majno and Anne Kuliscioff, who took pity on their sisters, slaves of work, and brought together distinguished people and popular parties to take care of this important law".

In his speech Angelo Celli listed all the unhealthy working conditions for children (e.g. the "carusi", little boys working in the Sicilian mines) and women (in canvas and silk factories, etc.). He proposed that the workload be distributed according to gender and age, and the establishment of work breaks. He also drew attention to the deficiency in the law when it allowed children as young as twelve to work. A limit of 14 years of age at least had been requested and younger children were allowed to work 12-hour shifts. Moreover, the pregnancy leave of 2-4 weeks was not covered by wages. Celli dedicated the last part of his parliamentary speech to Inspection activities. He fully agreed with Majno Bronzini's position in saying that "Women have to play a part in the inspections. Why do you not accept women inspectors? We have excellent working women who spend their whole lives working and would be the best assessors of their sisters' work. How can you imagine that men could understand women's subtleties? I cannot understand how such enlightened men of the Committee do not accept the proposal of women inspectors"

The law was published on the 19 June 1902 (No. 242) with limitations and lacking public control bodies. The Central Inspectorate of Industry and Trade published their first statistics concerning women's protection (39,446 in 1901, 43,265 in 1902, 21,767 in the first six months of 1903) (2).

Nina Rignano Sullam (1871-1945) on behalf of the UF suggested the creation of a women's branch of the factory inspectorate, (20) but it was only in 1907 that a Royal Decree appointed Santa Giliola Volonteri, secretary of the women's dressmakers association, as the first Italian woman inspector. She had completed social legislation training at the Humanitarian Society where Majno Bronzini was one of the leading members (14).

Angelo Celli eventually corresponded with Majno Bronzini, and they later met in Milan at the First International Congress on Occupational Diseases (1906). Previously Majno Bronzini had been guest of the Celli couple in Rome where she was recovering from her grief due to the death of her beloved “Mariuccia”, as Anna Celli Frantzel writes in her autobiography, already mentioned.

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN ERSILIA MAJNO BRONZINI AND LUIGI DEVOTO 1902-1921 (19)

In 1901 Majno Bronzini founded a new monthly periodical in Milan, while Luigi Devoto founded a new twice-monthly scientific journal in Pavia, *Il Lavoro*. Majno Bronzini had read Devoto's first journal and enthusiastically started a correspondence. She wrote the first letter requesting an exchange of information and seminars particularly involving the new institutions of Milan such as the UF, the Humanitarian Society and the Popular University. Devoto, from Pavia, rapidly replied with the same enthusiasm, pleased to receive attention from Milan. He continued the correspondence until 1921. Twenty-four letters were written but only two remain from Majno Bronzini, witnessing the shared intents, the mutual esteem for the “common cause”. The common cause brought Devoto to Milan (1906), to organize the First International Congress on Occupational Diseases (9-14 June 1906), and the construction of the “Clinica del Lavoro” (inaugurated on 20 March 1910).

On 6 December 1901 Majno Bronzini sent Devoto all the editions of her periodical “Unione Femminile” and invited him to her house in Milan, Pietro Verri street. In February 1902 in Majno's home, Devoto was touched by an unexpected and attentive audience “*I felt discomfort to see so many ladies [...] I have seen how heartily the problems of work are followed in your house*” (Letter No. 4, 10 February 1902) (19).

In the same letter of acknowledgement he proposed to Majno Bronzini the organization of an international congress in Milan for the year 1904 on the “medical protection of work”. The congress was held in 1906, and Majno Bronzini participated

to advocate the conditions of working women, as will be explained later.

Majno Bronzini did not lose time and published in her journal an article entitled, “Towards a Clinica del Lavoro” (18). The main aims and purposes of the Clinica were established at Majno's home, as Devoto wrote in 1935 (11).

In November 1902 in Rome, Devoto defended the cause of working women, pregnant women, and women inspectors participating in the Commission for Occupational Diseases established by the Minister Guido Baccelli (Letter No. 5, 19 November 1902) (19).

At the end of 1902 Devoto wrote to Majno Bronzini saying, “*You know that I very much admire the UF under whose auspices I took my first steps in Milan [...] For what I know and for what my value is, I will be at your disposal*” (Letter No. 17, 3 December 1902) (19).

The next year, complaining about his low academic position as an Associate Professor he wrote, “*You understand very well in which direction I want to take my work and what my relations are with my colleagues. We are a scientific network!*” (Letter No. 21, 20 November 1903) (19).

Angelo and Anna Celli, and Nina Rignano Sulam are cited in the letters and their role and that of the Unione Femminile in supporting Devoto was very evident. He wrote “*Oh! How the minds and the souls of the women members of the UF, while presenting only a few things, are greater compared to those of the Milanese physicians!*” (Letter No. 17, 3 December, 1902) (19). In both Milan and Pavia, Devoto had to face an academic environment that was hostile towards him and the project of the “Clinica del Lavoro”. Well known physicians, such as the Nobel Prize winner Camillo Golgi, were among those hostile to the project. The conflicting ties were probably due to the fact that two different municipalities were involved and to the differences in the academic degrees of the participants. The Majno's also supported his appointment as full professor.

Majno Bronzini invited Devoto to organize workshops on “Occupational diseases” at the UF.

On 20 March 1910 the “Clinica del Lavoro” was inaugurated: Majno Bronzini was present and re-

ceived formal acknowledgement in Devoto's inaugural speech as "*friend and supporter since 1901*" (12). The correspondence ended with the letter dated 11 February 1921, when the Italian fascist movement started.

Edoardo Majno, grandson and editor of the correspondence, defined the "Clinica del Lavoro" of Milan as "*an initiative of Devoto's fertilized by Majno Bronzini*". He also recognized the role of Anna Rita Buttafuoco (1951-1999), a historian and also President of the Unione Femminile from 1993 till her death in 1999. Buttafuoco, in fact, understood the importance of the correspondence and the role of Majno Bronzini from her studies of the "Asilo Mariuccia" institution (5), also founded by Majno Bronzini in 1901 following the death due to diphtheria of her daughter. Edoardo Majno published the correspondence in collaboration with the "Asilo Mariuccia" Foundation in 1985 (19).

THE FIRST CONGRESS ON OCCUPATIONAL DISEASES (1906)

Majno Bronzini and Sullam Rignano were the only two women members of the Promoting Committee of the First Congress on Occupational Diseases in Milan (9-14 June 1906) (6). The Humanitarian Society (Luigi Majno as secretary) was the leading sponsor, contributing with 500 Liras. Majno Bronzini, together with professors and senators, signed the first petition against nightwork for women. She also advocated, after the presentation of Luigi Carozzi, that "*night work is against physiology and this is the reason why women of all ages and men also, particularly if under 18 years old, should be excluded. If higher motivations or technical requirements force adults to work at night, adequate working conditions should be applied (shifts, temporary breaks, changes in working hours, exclusion if medical examinations so recommended, etc.)*" (1). Majno Bronzini went further in the Congress session on the "Protection of pregnant women" debating the presentation by Dr. F. Pestalozza. She suggested that "*presentations of high social and scientific content be read in the evening programme, so as to enable ladies and workers to participate, who could then listen to the content and the discus-*

sions on fundamental social themes. Few people are convinced and we need to convince others..."

A debate followed her proposal. De Cristoforis (1832-1915), senator of Parliament, accepted Majno Bronzini's proposal and agreed to define a date and a place (the Unione Femminile) in which the speakers would present abstracts and discussions to the working class.

The life and engagement of Majno Bronzini continued in support of the vote for women and against the colonial war even though she had lost her daughter Mariuccia (1902), her second daughter Carlotta (1905), and her husband Luigi Majno (1915). The World War I did the rest creating political divisions and a withdrawal in the socio-cultural scenario. After the First World War, Majno Bronzini coherently and energetically continued her commitment to the emancipation of women, to free them from unhealthy working conditions, from prostitution, from war and, in the end, from fascism. In 1933, the Unione Femminile was forced to close, Ersilia Majno Bronzini died the same year, on 17 February.

This study sought to recognize the historical debt of occupational health to this resilient and socially committed woman. The author believes this aim has been achieved thus confirming and motivating our debt to Ersilia Majno Bronzini, and to better explain why she really has to be considered an "Outstanding female figure in Occupational Health".

NO POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST RELEVANT TO THIS ARTICLE WAS REPORTED

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: *I wish to express my thanks to Valeria P. Babini, historian at the University of Bologna, and Eleonora Cirant, documentalist of the Unione Femminile in Milan*