Voices of madness from the Archive of former psychiatric hospital
S. Lazzaro in Reggio Emilia (Italy):
The Experience of the Museum for the History of Psychiatry

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My purpose is to illustrate you some of the "voices" from the former psychiatric hospital San Lazzaro, in Reggio Emilia, Italy, so, I'll start with a very brief introduction about its story.

Reggio Emilia is a city in the north of Italy, that counts today: 173,540 inhabitants in the city, and 536,618 in the district; it was established by Romans and grew up during the Middle Age.

It was exactly in the Middle Age, during the leprosy and plague epidemics, that they built a hospital in the east area of the town for the contagious patients: it was named "San Lazzaro", being Lazarus the saint protector against the plague.

During the Renaissance, when plague vanished, the hospital was used to host poors, homeless and also persons with mental problems, but without any project of care: it was a so-called "ospizio di mendicità", that we may translate from the Renaissance Italian language as "shelter for people without money".

Only in 1821, after Pinel, Chiarugi and their revolution about the treatment of psychiatric patients, Francesco IV, Duke of Este, lord of Reggio Emilia, nominated for the first time a doctor, Antonio Galloni, as director, with the assignment to organize a modern psychiatric hospital.

In the following decades, the hospital grew up and become famous all over Europe; at the beginning of the 20th century, San Lazzaro was composed by more than 20 buildings, with about 2000 patients hospitalized every year.

As you probably know, in 1978 psychiatric hospitals were closed by law in Italy, replaced by Community Psychiatric Services: so, also San Lazzaro closed as asylum, however leaving traces of its long history.

From 1821 to 1978 it hosted about 100,000 inmates, so today in our archive (you can see it in the picture) we conserve about 100,000 case files and in addition 1000 boxes with other documents (e.g. about economic management, staff, buildings and so on: the so-called administrative fonds); by the way, I'd like to inform you that the archive is open to receive students, historians and schools.

Let's take under consideration now the structure a typical case file: the model used was approximately the same from his introduction, in 1870, till the end. I'll show you an example of the first year of the previous century.

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In the first page the physicians wrote personal data, diagnosis and exitus (recovered or dead); in the following pages we find anamnesis (personal and familial), physical and psychological tests (and particularly in the golden age of the Lombroso theories, the body and head measurings and photos, as you saw in the first page) and notes about the daily (or not so regularly daily) examinations. Randomly in the files we may also find photos, drawings, private letters (from doctors to family, from patient to family, from patient to doctors...).

And so this is the focus of my speech: What kind of voices can we heard today, reading a case file written 140 years ago?

In order to answer this question, I'll follow the results of a three years research (made 2009-2011), about case files of patients hospitalized during the period 1877-1907 (under the direction of Augusto Tamburini), but I'll also also show (and translate for you) some documents never published before.

As first aspect it's important to underline that two different points of view emerge from the case files: doctors' and patients' voices. As first I point out the doctors’ point of view.

From the age of Positivism to the half of the 20th century, the Italian alienists were always focused on physiological data and they gave a low relevance to the psychological and emotional range: this aspect emerge clearly out from the documents, where we can read many notes about patients' physical look, their eating habits or about their previous, even though non psychiatric, illnesses.

I'll read you the translation of some lines from case files: in Italy we have a saying, "Tradurre è tradire" that means "translating is betraying", because something is always lost in translation. I can translate you the meaning of the words, but not their particular taste of the obsolete or archaic words that would be evident for Italian public.

Angelo C., 38 years old, his mother died because of one of the usual illnesses characteristic in the old people, we have no info about his father. He always was a man of poor intellect, with no education. He can barely read and write his name. He is a merry man, diligent in his work as farmer, malnourished (he usually ate only corn). He made no abuse with alcohol or sex.

The first diagnosis was depression, maybe someone of you when I read that he used to eat only corn could have predicted that he suffered from pellagra (rough skin).

There were, obviously, some differences in the analysis of men and women: as we can see in the record in this picture, they used to examine the trend of the menstruation and of eventual pregnancies and breastfeeding, or if they had had miscarriages and so on.

In this example, we can read:

Augusta, 56 years old, married twice, catholic, good woman. She had first menstruation when she was 15 and the trend was always regular. She has been pregnant seven times: the first, the fourth, the fifth and the seventh pregnancies ended with miscarriages. The three children born (two female and one male) died when they were only few months old.

The doctor who wrote the file (en passant, I inform you that she was a woman, Maria Del Rio, who later become one of the first expert in children's psychiatric rehabilitation and education) showed no interest toward the psychological trauma caused by miscarriages and children's death, and in fact she wrote that
Augusta "never suffered from relevant illness".

Another important aspect for the physicians was the "moral matter", so they used to analyse the patients' behaviour, with notes related to alcohol abuse, sexual habits, bad temper, problems with justice, but also revolutionary political ideas or poor interest in religion, houseworks (for women) or patriotic feelings (especially during periods of war or in the Risorgimento, that is the period leading to unification of Italy).

The "moral matter" was well stressed also for the offenders, hospitalized for examinations for medical reports requested by court during the trial. In their files, we recognize the special attention by doctors, who wrote accurate anamnesis, with transcription of conversations with patient, analysis of what patients drew, wrote etc. Here a short example of a dialogue between patient and doctor (the patient, Antonio, killed his brother and later was considered unfit to plead and discharged):

Q: Are you catholic?
A: Yes, of course, I'm not Turkish!
Q: Do you confess usually?
A: I used to, but not more since I live with a woman without marriage.
Q: And why did you engaged with that woman?
A: Because everyone does so, also gentlemen do it.

However, we should also consider that some files are empty or with few notes, maybe because not all the patients were important for the physicians. The lack of data is also important for the historians, so they have to investigate why the physicians wrote so few about some cases. Surely it is a complex and intriguing question, but today we have no time enough to answer.

Now we have to move to the patients' voices. Even though only few of them able to write and read, because the great part was from the rural areas with a low level of literacy, sometimes we could find, in the case files, some written works, that could be divided in: letters to family, letters to doctors, biographical memories, poems, essays (rare) and incoherent traces. All these documents were preserved in case files, because the physicians analyzed them as clues for patients' condition. I'm going to show you three examples of patients' voices.
As first we start with Giuseppe F., machine compositor, Admitted in march 1900 with the diagnosis of paranoia, with delirium of jealousy (against his wife, married 4 months before: he convinced himself she was unfaithful and she infected him with sexually transmitted illnesses).

He died in the hospital, beacause of gastroeneteritis, in june 1904.

During the hospitalization, he wrote an essay about printing art, with a short history (from Gutenberg to the 19th century) and with several chapters about the printing techniques. The manuscript is illuminated with drawings made by himself. The essay is dedicated to his father, who taught him the printing art.

This is the cover, with the portraits of the three fathers of modern printing technique: Fust, Gutenberg and Schöffer (written Scoeffer).

From chapter 2, models of different tools and the description of the ideal location for a printing press: “In order to open a printing press, you need a great room at the ground floor, with wide windows, so that the pressmen could both inhale pure air and receive sun light”.

The second example I choose is the case file of Augusto Gilmore, from Cincinnati (USA), Admitted nov. 1894, with diagnosis of schizophrenia (dementia praecox).

Both Augusto and his brother Cassius were hospitalised here during their stay in Italy, in a sort of Grand tour: they came from a rich family, they studied art in Florence (in the pictures some drawing by Augusto); then both of them died in San Lazzaro. Augusto is for us a wonderful example, because in his file are preserved letters he wrote to his family, the mail between his father and the doctors, some autobiographical memories. Even though Augusto used to write his letters in Italian and his father in French, there are also some documents in English: I'm going to read you some of them, so in this case we will have no problems of translation.

May 1889

Dear mother, I wish I had a letter from you. Long since suffering, I am not incapable of feeling that my malady is an old disadvantage. On this occasion I am capable of understanding any expression.

If the door were opened to me I should go immediately to the bank and obtain the money for the journey to Florence, to returne to Florence. Money to return to Florence, please. Perhaps the dentist would extract the gold from my teeth for loan of exchange.
Few days after 1st jan. 1889  
Dear father, to mother I wrote some days ago as obedient son and I now take the pen to draw a good many alphabetical representation of sound in expression of sentiment that will encourage high consideration of myself.  
In the following lines he mixed Italian, English and German words, in a speech without meaning. The letter ends with 2 pages of letters, as you can see in the image below.

Maybe we should consider this last part of the letter as an incoherent trace, like others we can find in our archive. E.g. we can see in this image a writing/drawing by a patient, we call it "the mummy" because of the body structure. The lines seem to be written, but they are not letters: they are only strokes without meaning. So, we could say that it's really a product of madness, this is a voice of madness, even though today we are unable to read and understand.

Till now, I spoke about the past, but I'd like to end with a note about the present days.  
In 2012 we curated a new exhibit for the Museum of history of psychiatry (launched by director Carlo Livi in 1875), now hosted in one of the buildings of the former hospital. Speaking about history and present of madness is never easy, especially in a country that closed the psychiatric hospitals 40 years ago. It was naturally clear for us that we should mediate the visit for the public with a guided tour that was not only a sequence of dates, names and so on.  
We choose to follow a theatrical model: some texts from the case files are declaimed by actors during the guided tour; in order to create a more fascinating experience for the public (and in fact it happens so). Another important characteristic of this project is that all the actors are patients.
followed by the Community Psychiatric Services (acting is part of their psychiatric rehabilitation program).
During the education programs dedicated to the school classes, the students could also meet with “facilitatori” = people with experience of mental illness, who testify their own histories (they speak about illness, recovery, everyday life, structures for psychiatric help...).

With this last note, we ended our voyage into the voices from Reggio Emilia madness and I'd like to thank you with for your attention this last image from our archive: a painting by a patient, Federico S., earl of Belford, entitled "Brave thesis".