



**Title: Italian wet nurses and syphilis**  
**Interviewee: David Kertzer**  
**Duration: 6 minutes, 10 seconds**

### **About this transcript**

Each Bookpod transcript is an edited version of a longer conversation recorded in person or over the phone via Skype. It is not a formal essay. To gain a better appreciation of the text, below, please listen to the podcast episode.

### **Introduction**

Does the state ever have a right to get between a mother and her child?

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, provost of Brown University and historian David Kertzer talks about *Amalia's Tale*, the book he wrote to dramatize the state practice in nineteenth-century Italy of compelling unmarried women to give up their babies to a foundling hospital. The consequences were problematic for everyone involved.

### **Presentation**

What people don't realize is that back in the nineteenth century, in Italy and some other countries, huge numbers of babies were abandoned at birth and taken in by foundling homes. Italy, in particular, where the system began hundreds of years ago, seems a little anomalous, because we think of the Italian mama as so tied to her child. But the fact is in the mid-nineteenth century, in places like Milan



and Florence, about one out of every three babies was being abandoned at birth to these foundling homes.

For a long time women who were not married were essentially required to give up their babies to foundling homes. Until the fall of the Papal States in Bologna, if you were an unmarried woman and had a baby, and you said you wanted to keep the baby the police would actually be sent by the local authorities to take the baby away from you.

The belief was that if an unmarried woman was having a baby, you should not go after the father, because the father, among other things, might well be married or he might be the employer of the woman, therefore not [an] appropriate mate for the woman. So there was all this protection of the father of the child. And all this translated into the taking away of the babies into these foundling homes.

A big problem they had was how to keep these babies alive because, before the twentieth century, the only way to keep a baby alive was by finding a wet nurse. There was no good artificial feeding that would allow them to survive.



And so with thousands and thousands of babies being left each year at these foundling homes, there was a very complicated system for bringing in women who would be willing for payment to breastfeed these babies 'til they could be weaned.

In doing that, a big problem that the authorities came across was, and this was something that was basically repressed, that women who breastfed these babies were at risk of contracting syphilis from nursing them.

There were many, many of these women who were contracting syphilis in this way, because in many poor peasant communities, the major source of income for these poor women was to lend themselves as wet nurses to the children from the foundling home.

From the foundling home's point of view, if this danger became known, it would become very difficult to recruit wet nurses. And if they couldn't recruit enough wet nurses, the foundlings would die. So the doctors themselves found themselves with a very cruel dilemma.



When I was researching this for a book I wrote more generally on the topic of infant abandonment in the past, I came across some court cases that began to arise in the latter part of the nineteenth century that really brought this drama to light.

So, this is a drama that involves kind of a David and Goliath aspect to it. At the center is this woman Amalia Bagnacavalli, who at the beginning is a 23-year-old illiterate peasant woman, newly married with a one-year-old child, who in the winter, to try to get their family through, is basically told to go to the foundling home and get a baby so they'd have a little bit of income through her wet nursing of the foundling.

When she discovers that she has contracted syphilis, she thinks from the baby, she is put in touch with a crusading lawyer in Bologna – and this itself is kind of interesting, 'cause she lives in this mountain village outside the city and would have had no contact with the city, and certainly know nothing about the world of lawyers.

Yet, someone led her to this man, Augusto Barbieri. He was



in his twenties, a recently minted lawyer who was trying to make his reputation. [He] saw himself as the champion of the oppressed.

You have to remember, Italy itself had just emerged from its days and Bologna's as part of the Papal States under papal rule into a modern nation-state of Italy. And so he saw himself as part of a generation of more enlightened leaders who was reacting against the old wicked ways of the past.

So he champions Amalia's case. And who was the case against? It's against the hospitals of Bologna, and the head of the founding board is, in fact, one of the great aristocrats of Bologna, Count Isolani.

So the case is actually Amalia Bagnacavalli, namely, this illiterate peasant woman, against Count Isolani, the scion of the noble families of Bologna.

But over time, Augusto Barbieri himself uses this case to advance his own career. And just at the time when it looks like Amalia, this poor peasant, will triumph over Count Isolani, he does some things, which lead to his own



enrichment and her impoverishment. So, it's not a story with a terribly happy ending.

#

[This section does not appear in the audio podcast.]

The case couldn't have happened much earlier than the late nineteenth century because basically peasants had no rights. And what we today would call medical malpractice – there was no term for it back then – so, holding doctors responsible for their negligence was something that only developed in Europe in the late nineteenth century, at least in modern form. So this is showing a moment of transition, really, in social history.

### **Valedictory**

For more about David Kertzer and his other “micro-histories,” visit [davidkertzer.com](http://davidkertzer.com).

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you next time at Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.