

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Histoire des Alpes = Storia delle Alpi = Geschichte der Alpen
<b>Herausgeber:</b>	Association Internationale pour l'Histoire des Alpes
<b>Band:</b>	30 (2025)
<b>Artikel:</b>	Foundlings and foster children in rural families in 19th-century Bohemia (eskomoravská vrchovina, Novohradské Hory, Šumava)
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<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1091263">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1091263</a>

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# Foundlings and Foster Children in Rural Families in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Bohemia (Českomoravská vrchovina, Novohradské Hory, Šumava)<sup>1</sup>

Markéta Skořepová

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## Riassunto – Bambini abbandonati e dati in affido alle famiglie rurali nella Boemia del XIX secolo

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Bambini abbandonati e dati in affido alle famiglie rurali nella Boemia del XIX secolo. Alla fine del XVIII secolo, la Boemia (Repubblica Ceca) istituì una rete ospedaliera dedicata ai bambini abbandonati allo scopo di ridurre il numero degli infanticidi. I neonati venivano poi affidati a famiglie rurali, che provenivano per lo più da regioni povere e montuose. L'affidamento, in queste zone, costituiva una fonte di reddito molto diffusa. Nel contributo, sono prese in considerazione le fonti parrocchiali della Selva Boema, dei Monti di Nové Hrady e dell'altopiano Boemo-Moravo, riservando particolare attenzione alle condizioni di vita e alla posizione sociale di questi bambini.

### Introduction

The present paper introduces the first results of research on foundlings cared for in village families in Bohemia, today's Czech Republic. The study has focused on places that are located far from the Alpes and at lower altitudes (only about 500–750 metres above sea level), but mountainous regions nonetheless, with specific population structure and means of subsistence. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Habsburg monarchy followed the European trend and took over responsibility for the care of disadvantaged children which subsequently was to be provided by the State. Economic theory went hand in hand with new postulates on the care of public health and education and serious changes in the perception of crime and punishment, including the situation of single mothers and illegitimate children.

In the 1780s, Emperor Josef II ordered the establishment of a network of maternity hospitals connected with foundlings' homes. Over several years, each provincial capital was to build a state institution, which later (in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) would be operated and funded by the governments of each particular land. The first such maternity and foundling hospital, «Findelhaus», was established in Vienna in 1784. It was then followed by hospitals in Brno (1785), Linz (1786) and Prague (1789), to speak only about asylums situated within the Czech provinces.<sup>2</sup> The tradition of asylums for unwanted babies was obviously strong in Catholic countries, especially in Italy and France. Under the rule of Napoleon, a system of hospitals was introduced in France: equipped with «tours de l'abandon», special devices (foundling wheels) that enabled the anonymous abandonment of a child. Protestant countries aimed rather more for protection and correction of unwed mothers, although the foundlings' homes for little babies, such as Coram in London, also existed.<sup>3</sup>

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The mission of maternity hospitals and foundling homes was to save the lives of unwanted babies, prevent abortions and infanticides and provide care and moral education for the offspring of poor, unmarried mothers. The children were called foundlings or orphans to mitigate the fact they were bastards abandoned by their parents. Unmarried mothers were allowed to give birth in the hospital under professional supervision and leave their offspring there.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the hospital's services were not provided for free: a mother could pay an amount of money and remain anonymous or she could fulfil her obligations in kind: first, she had to permit medical students to assist her delivery (the maternity hospitals in Prague and Vienna became university clinics), and then she would work as a wet nurse for several weeks in the hospital.<sup>5</sup>

Contact with their newborn offspring led many women to change their plans and keep the baby in their own care. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, authorities accommodated their efforts by paying a proportional amount from the fee that would otherwise have gone to the foster mother. However, the mother had to give up the option of leaving the child at the institution in the future. From 1875, the Prague hospital paid this «2/3 of the nursing allowance» to biological mothers or grandmothers who agreed not to abandon the baby.<sup>6</sup>

Each baby admitted to the hospital received a registration number, by which all official administrative operations were conducted during the time the child was under the supervision of the hospital. The identity of children, however, remained protected. A child inherited the surname of his/her mother, who could also choose her child's first name and was allowed to stay in touch with him or her. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, officials respected even the religion of babies and their mothers respectively.

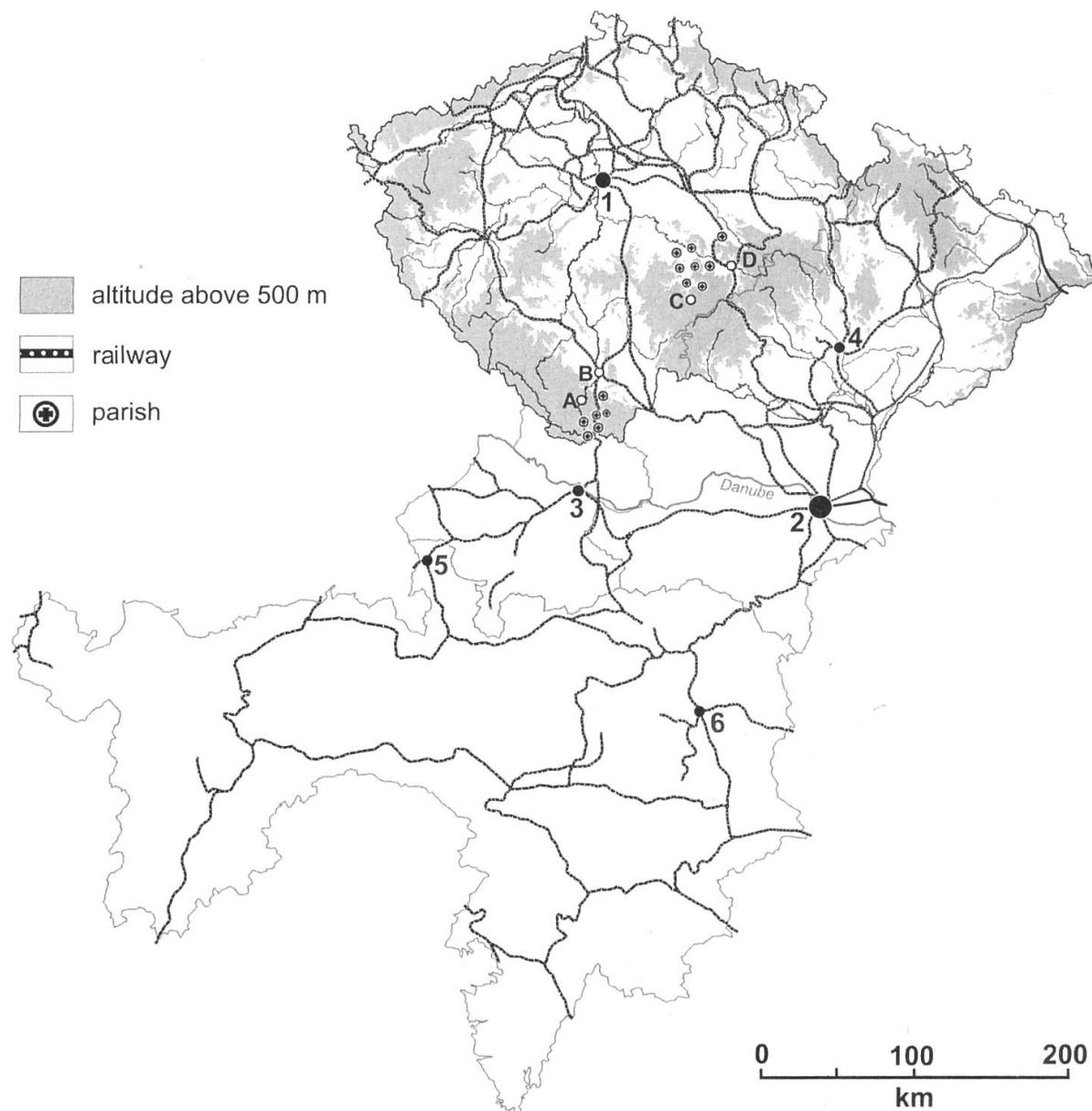
The institution itself cared for babies only for a few days; then, they were handed over to foster families, who took responsibility for them for several years (six, ten, or twelve, according to the rules of the particular foundling hospital and the period). Then the children returned to the capital. Until the 1860s, to help children who had grown up in their care the foundling homes sought either employment for them as domestic workers or an apprenticeship placement. When the new Domicile Law came into force in 1863, the responsibility for older children was transferred to the municipalities where the mothers came from, and the children leaving their foster families were to be supported by the community.<sup>7</sup>

The fostering was, of course, remunerated. The monthly amount depended on the age of the child: the older a foundling was, the lower the remuneration paid for them. The sum of money was officially designated for the child's needs, but it did make a certain contribution to the household budget. Village nurses were preferred because of the general medical belief that the countryside is better for health than a town. The fact that most foster mothers were village women can also be explained from a family-economy point of view. The benefits paid for fostering were not high but still not irrelevant for poorer families in regions where job opportunities were rare. They attracted especially females, whose husbands were periodically away from home as seasonal migrants. The mountainous areas with unprofitable agricultural production fit this description.<sup>8</sup>

Hardly any information is available about the life of foundlings during their stay in the substitute care of foster families. And yet several thousand children went through foundling hospitals each year in the Habsburg monarchy. The aim of the present research is to find some answers to subsequent questions in the context of Bohemian highlands: Who were the people willing to take on a foundling? Why did they? What were their own families like? Did they take good care of the children entrusted to them? And how to find this sort of information?

### **State of knowledge and available sources**

The fate of foundlings naturally caught the attention of humanitarians. Children abandoned anonymously in a land's maternity hospitals fell outside the traditional system of local care for the 'native' poor, which was based on neighbourly solidarity and organised within the framework of the municipality, parish, or estate. This local system was able to support orphans but was totally indifferent to foundlings.<sup>9</sup> At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several short novels



Map 1. Maternity hospitals and areas under analysis. Land capitals with maternity hospitals: 1 Prague (Bohemia); 2 Vienna (Lower Austria); 3 Linz (Upper Austria); 4 Brno (Moravia); 5 Salzburg (Salzburg); 6 Graz (Steiermark). District towns: A Český Krumlov; B České Budějovice; C Pelhřimov; D Havlíčkův Brod. Based on railway map *Eisenbahnkarte Oesterreich-Ungarn*, 1871, <https://amo.ostrava.cz/vystavy-2/vystavy/vystava-mapy-v-promenach-casu/zeleznicni-mapa-rakouska-uherska-1871/>. Map created by Peter Woodman Rough.

appeared aiming to raise public awareness of the situation of abandoned children but their influence can be doubted.<sup>10</sup> The most influential Czech philanthropist was Marie Červinková Riegrová, daughter and granddaughter of two most important politicians and representatives of the Czech nation of the period. Using her education and contacts, she managed to publish a very comprehensive study on institutional care for foundlings and disadvantaged chil-

dren, which included an overview of charitable systems in various European countries.<sup>11</sup> Her work became a basis not only for her contemporaries engaged in social work but also for modern Czech historians who, after 2000, began to pay more attention to the history of children and childhood.<sup>12</sup>

European historiography began to address the issue of abandoned children at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>13</sup> The development of research on the history of childhood in the following decades produced a number of significant studies on foundlings. Initially, many of these focused primarily on how institutions intended for the care of children without parents operated. Later, scholars' attention turned increasingly to the children themselves. Many studies have been published to date, devoted to disadvantaged children, orphans and foundlings in different parts of Europe.<sup>14</sup> For the Bohemian and Moravian contexts, the detailed work of Verena Pawlowsky on the «Findelhaus» in Vienna is essential.<sup>15</sup> Institutional care for orphaned children in nearby Slovakia is the focus of the publication edited by Ingrid Kušníráková and Elena Mannová.<sup>16</sup>

The first analytical studies on foundlings in history in the Czech lands were based on the methodology of historical demography. Alena Šubrtová analysed the parish registers of deaths in the St. Apollinaire parish in Prague at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This parish included the maternity hospital and reported extremely high natality and mortality rates.<sup>17</sup> The same hospital with its well-preserved registers of births and deaths attracted the attention of Petr Svobodný, who presented his research internationally at the conference *Enfance abandonnée et société en Europe XIV<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* in Rome in 1991.<sup>18</sup>

At the turn of the millennium, increasing progress in gender history in the Czech Republic led to a new interest in, and new approaches to, the history of the family and childhood.<sup>19</sup> Inspired by Michel Foucault's theory of biopower and social disciplining, Daniela Tinková published a book entitled *The Birth of the Maternity Hospital*.<sup>20</sup> Martina Halířová wrote several studies on care for disadvantaged children in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bohemia. She devoted herself particularly to a special type of institution, namely houses of correction for young offenders, and also covered the organisation of the Prague foundling hospital and management regulations.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the way the institutions were organised and managed internally is quite well known – besides other things by comparison with a number of foreign studies – the life of children placed in foster families is virtually unknown. Yet, these children must have accounted for quite a large proportion of population in some regions. More than 730 000 babies were abandoned in Vienna in 1784–1910 (approximately 5800 a year); the Prague foundling hospital used to look for a home for 3000 wards every year at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup>

Sources are the main challenge. The foundling homes had a very good bureaucratic apparatus. The archive of the Prague hospital, in particular, is perfectly well preserved.<sup>23</sup> The hospitals kept records about every abandoned child by means of Books of evidence. In these books, entries included the child's name, date of birth and death, and name and address of the foster parents. Thousands of foundlings were captured by this record-keeping every year; a huge amount of data and evidence which, if properly processed, would produce useful statistics in terms of geography of fostering or mortality of children. The everyday life of foundlings and their foster families are described by rarely preserved reports of inspection journeys undertaken by the institution's officials and most importantly in Catholic parish archives, as the priests represented the lowest authority in foster care. The problem is the unequal preservation and quality of the archives, they are always incomplete and contain different types of documents, but they are very important and grant irreplaceable information. The evidence of foundlings at the level of particular parishes was regularly controlled by vicars and bishops during canonical visitations, but no obligatory patterns or forms for them.<sup>24</sup> The most usual are diverse registers of placed children, often held for many years, containing personal data of children and names of their foster parents, accounts of allowances and diverse norms, circulars and notifications about care for foundlings and administrative operations. The correspondence with particular foundling hospitals and diverse offices such as municipal and district representatives is very important, because the parish priests used to be tasked to work as mediators between foster parents and authorities. These letters usually contain simple and formalised advice, nevertheless many of them describe the individual living conditions of children and the situation in foster families including potential problems.

Preserved documentation is also a key factor for choosing the places analysed in the present paper. Emphasising mountainous areas, pursuing the distribution of children from foundling hospitals and available sources, fourteen parishes in Šumava Mountains (Böhmerwald in German), Novohradské Hory (called Freiwald or Gratzener Bergland in Austria) and in the eastern part of Českomoravská vrchovina (Bohemian-Moravian Highlands) have been selected. The land borders caused no impediment or obstruction to fostering, because of the common legal framework.

The parish of Sv. Jan nad Malší is located in today's České Budějovice District.<sup>25</sup> The parishes of Blansko (deserted today), Dolní Dvořiště, Horní Dvořiště, Kaplice, and Rožmberk nad Vltavou fall within the Český Krumlov District.<sup>26</sup> All these places are situated in the foothills of Šumava and Novohradské Hory respectively, and the altitude of their administrative centres varies between 528 and 618 metres above sea level. This peripheral coun-

District	Parish	Number of inhabitants in 1900
České Budějovice	Sv. Jan and Malší	1916
Český Krumlov	Blansko	1296
	Dolní Dvořiště	1247
	Horní Dvořiště	1117
	Kaplice	3124
	Rožmberk and Vltavou	1719
Havlíčkův Brod	Golčův Jeníkov	4466
	Hněvkovice	1450
	Ledeč and Sázavou	6758
	Lipnice and Sázavou	5028
	Zahrádka	3175
Pelhřimov	Mladé Bříště	2234
	Senožaty	1998
	Želiv	2367

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Tab. 1. Parishes analysed. Source: *Historický lexikon obcí České republiky 1869–2011*, <https://csu.gov.cz/produkty/historicky-lexikon-obci-1869-az-2015> [23. 4. 2025].

tryside on the border with Bavaria and Austria was ethnically and linguistically mixed, some areas were completely German-speaking and a strong «German» minority lived there until 1945.

The parishes in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands are situated at an altitude of up to 510 metres. For the Havlíčkův Brod District we selected the parishes of Golčův Jeníkov, Hněvkovice, Ledeč nad Sázavou, Lipnice nad Sázavou, and Zahrádka (deserted today).<sup>27</sup> The parishes of Mladé Bříště, Senožaty, and Želiv belong to the neighbouring Pelhřimov District.<sup>28</sup>

The common denominator of the selected parishes was unfavourable economic conditions. The relatively harsh climate was not suitable for agriculture; and the location in less accessible foothills and remoteness from industrial centres resulted in low living standards for the local rural population. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the livelihood of inhabitants often depended on low-paid domestic proto-industrial work or seasonal migration.<sup>29</sup>

Chronologically, the research is also defined by the state of preserved sources. Its core lies in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while older documents are usually available only for the surroundings of the cities where the hospitals worked, not for more remote, mountainous areas on the periphery. It was

decided to end the period covered by the research in 1913, although it could potentially be extended at least into the interwar period. The decision not to extend it beyond WWI lies in ethical considerations and standards regarding personal data protection. Some archives, in fact, deny access to documents that are less than one hundred years old.

### Wet nurses and foster parents

Since children used to be handed over from the hospital very early, mostly one or two weeks old, the main requirement for a foster mother was, of course, breastfeeding, which was the only means of assuring the necessary nourishment. For this reason, the foundling hospitals' offices referred primarily to women. Any applicant wishing to take care of a newborn baby and thus receive the highest allowance, had to be the mother of a young baby – alive or just dead. Parents of older children or childless couples were allowed to receive only a weaned child. In any case, a foster mother had to be married (or widowed), a Catholic, and enjoy a good reputation to provide adequate moral education to the foundling. The family had to have appropriate housing and means of livelihood, farmland, ownership of livestock, and the employment or trade of the foster mother's husband had to be declared. Modest living conditions were not a drawback; on the contrary, raising children in simplicity was desirable, especially in the case of foundlings.<sup>30</sup>

The eligibility of the potential guardians had to be confirmed by local priests. These were also responsible for overseeing the foster families and ensuring communication between them and the hospital, including settlements and remittances of payments. The municipal authorities' responsibilities increased during the century; the representatives were asked to countersign a recommendation for foster parents, which the foundling homes followed when transferring children into their care. Only in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the role of local physicians increased, when they were entrusted with systematically monitoring the foundlings' health.<sup>31</sup>

Central evidence preserved in the archive of the Prague foundling hospital shows that fostering was popular in suburban areas and in regions to the south of the city of Prague.<sup>32</sup> The fertile territories near the Elbe River or the industrial regions in the northwestern parts of Bohemia evidently offered other possibilities to make a living. The highest concentration of foundlings was in south-central Bohemia, in today's districts of Tábor and Benešov. In the mountainous, outlying regions under analysis, the number of foster families was usually lower.<sup>33</sup>

Land borders were no barrier to fostering: nurses interested in children from various regions of the Habsburg Monarchy could register with any foundling hospital. Later, hospital rules required that the journey with a little foundling should not take more than four hours. After the mid-century, the railway played an increasingly important role in the intake of foundlings. From the 1870s onwards, the state railways even offered fare discounts for foster mothers travelling to the land capital to pick up a baby.<sup>34</sup>

The regions under analysis had very good connections. The South Bohemian regions of Šumava and Novohradské Hory were connected with Prague as well as with Austria by traditional roads. In the 1830s, České Budějovice was linked with Linz in Lower Austria by a horse track, lately transformed into a normal steam railway. The direct train line connecting Havlíčkův Brod in Bohemian-Moravian Highlands both with Prague and Vienna was completed in 1871. Whereas foundlings from Vienna and Linz were received in Šumava, foster families in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands took in primarily children from Prague. In many areas, children from two different hospitals ended up living in the same neighbourhood. For example, foundlings from Linz as well as from Vienna came to be raised in the parish of Český Krumlov, and families of the Hněvkovice parish fostered children from both Prague and Vienna. When the foster parents could choose, they usually preferred foundlings from Vienna: since 1873, in fact, the Prague foundling hospital used to pay for a child's upbringing until they reached the age of six, while the Vienna institution used to provide support until the child turned ten, and the payment were higher. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a foster mother taking in a child from Prague could expect 6 gulden per month during the first year, 4 gulden per month during the second year, which dropped to 3 gulden monthly in the next four years. Remittance from Vienna was initially 7.2 gulden per month, during the second year the remuneration was down to 6 gulden monthly, and then down to 4.5 gulden for older children, aged from two to ten years. In addition, the baby was fitted out with basic clothes and the foster family was allowed to keep all these things should the child survive its first year.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, the distribution of infants in the countryside was very unequal. Sometimes, attitudes towards fostering in villages – situated close to each other – differed (or so it seems from the preserved documents), for no apparent reason, such as distance and transport connections, means of livelihood or opportunities for extra income. Foundling hospitals actively sought foster mothers, by providing information on their activities through newspaper advertisements and other printed materials. The Prague foundling hospital, when overcrowded, used to publish a proclamation to attract new foster mothers, and sometimes it also accused local priests and representatives of reject-

ing foster care in their areas.<sup>36</sup> It can also be assumed that an example of foster families in the surroundings played a role in the decision process of potential foster parents.

The unequal representation of foundlings in areas adjacent to each other may be illustrated by an example of two parishes in the Havlíčkův Brod District, Bohemian-Moravian Highlands. Zahrádka and Golčův Jeníkov are approximately 20 km apart and their distance from Prague can be estimated at 21 hours on foot. In Zahrádka, a special book for recording foundlings taken into care was established by the parish administration as late as 1871. Yet, the parish registers of burials recorded the death of the first foundling from Prague in the market town of Zahrádka nearly 30 years before, as early as 1844. By 1871, 100 foundlings had died in the parish according to the register of burials. The first child from Vienna came to Zahrádka in 1872, one year after the region was connected to a railway network. From 1871 to 1895, the parish accepted 1063 foundlings from both Prague and Vienna, an average 43 per year. In 1896–1913, when identifying the origin of foster children became possible, another 453 foundlings from Prague and 203 foundlings from Vienna arrived, that is 28,5 per year on average).<sup>37</sup> In 1900, 3333 inhabitants lived in this parish of 14 villages. Considering the natality in Bohemia (35,8 births per 1000 inhabitants in the period of 1895–1899), one might surmise that every fourth childbirth was followed by the arrival of a foundling there. On the other hand, in Golčův Jeníkov, where a technically very similar system of evidence of foundlings was kept in 1906–1913, there were only eight foundlings recorded, and six of them lived with their biological kin when supported by foundling hospitals.<sup>38</sup>

### Living conditions

The question of the living conditions of abandoned children is the most crucial aspect of the issue of foundlings. At the same time, it presents a significant challenge in terms of sources and their critique. Very few reports on the behaviour of foster parents towards the children are preserved. Not only but, predictably, they capture only the extremes of the spectrum: they either highlight exceptionally good relations or, conversely, depict entirely dismal circumstances in foster families. The only generalisable measure of the living conditions of foundlings is by monitoring their mortality rate compared to other children.<sup>39</sup>

The accurate records of the Prague maternity hospital revealed a significantly higher mortality rate among the newborn, which can be attributed primarily to the poverty and difficult life situation of the mothers who sought the

institution's services.<sup>40</sup> The mortality of foundlings remained distinctively high after they left hospital. In 1897, the foundling hospital in Prague claimed that the mortality of children in foster care had reached 10,65 %. Nevertheless, the evidence preserved in parish archives shows that nearly half of the children in foster care usually died before their sixth or tenth birthday when they were to return to the hospital. Information about the deaths of children placed in parishes can be found in most regional registers of foundlings. Many of these, however, are evidently incomplete. In Sv. Jan pod Skalou parish (Novohradské Hory, 1255 inhabitants in 1880), 101 children from Linz were placed in 1850–1863, and 31 (30,7 %) of them died during their stay there. Simultaneously, the same parish also received children from Vienna between 1849–1912 (with a peak in 1880–1883, when 64 foundlings arrived), of whom nearly half died while in foster care (67 out of 140, i.e. 47,8 %).<sup>41</sup> Another South-Bohemian document says that the Prague Foundling Hospital administration considered a 50 % death rate among children in foster care as admissible.<sup>42</sup>

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In the 1890s, the administration of the Havlíčkův Brod nad Ledeč districts in Bohemian-Moravian Highlands complained about high mortality, especially high mortality among foundlings.<sup>43</sup> Actually, the residents of the Hněvkovice parish took on responsibility for 121 foundlings in 1878–1895 and buried 53 of them (43,8 %).<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, in 1911 a commissioner of the Prague hospital wrote that the situation in foster families in these districts had improved, among other things because the foster mothers were visiting doctors regularly.<sup>45</sup>

The form and composition of the foster families will require detailed reconstruction of the households. At present and on the basis of the sources just analysed, the only way to do so is by using the example of Želiv, a village approximately 100 km or 22 hours on foot from Prague, where an extraordinarily old list of foundlings is preserved. It dates back to the 1840s, thus long before the railway was built, and it contains only five names of foundlings. The foster families used to be cottagers, with only small plots of land, usually had three or four children of their own, and took in an infant from the hospital three or six months after the last childbirth.<sup>46</sup> There is no evidence of other foundlings in these households, but it is possible that other foundlings lived there before or after the registered children. The case of the Dvořák family is different and interesting in the context of this tiny sample: the father worked as a coachman for the local monastery, where his family were housed. They had seven children of their own, and one of the daughters gave birth to an illegitimate baby in the Vienna hospital, twenty years after she had welcomed her little foster sister.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, recommendation letters for families wanting to become foster parents of foundlings are missing for the areas under analysis. These doc-

uments are usually very instructive as they describe family composition as well as economic backgrounds of the potential foster families. The only preserved recommendation letter, dated back to 1840, was found in the Horní Dvořiště parish in Šumava. The Eichler family had, in addition to their five biological children, one foundling in their care and declared a wish to take in another one. They were applying for a new baby just after the mother's last puerperium. The family owned a house and cultivated three pieces of land.<sup>48</sup> From the sources preserved for other regions, it is clear that ownership of a dwelling with agricultural background was a key factor in the decision of whether or not to entrust a baby to a family.

### Affection and abuse

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Information about the treatment for children is rare and it is very important to follow not only the norms in behaviour and education, but also the particular «stories» of foundlings in foster care. Basic features of the childcare represented the children quite well-fed and clean, consulting their health with a doctor when necessary and teaching them some moral and religious principles. In this sense, several unique individual evaluations of foster families in Hněvkovice were formulated in 1887. The remarks are written into the register of foundlings, probably as a result of an inspection organised by the officials of the foundlings' hospital or maybe by local authorities. For example, Josefa Pánek, born in 1886, was described as «healthy, [having] home-cooked meals, good clothing, good behaviour». Karel Pazdera was «well cared for and kept clean for six years. He knows the prayers of Our Father, Ave Maria, and the Apostles' Creed, and was guided towards a Christian way of life. He has not yet attended school». Several foster mothers from the same parish were contrarily admonished to pay more attention to cleanliness.<sup>49</sup> Ernestina Gadingrová, born in 1891 in Vienna and raised near Lipnice n. Sázavou was probably lucky, she attended «school very diligently, and the foster parents are quite attentive to her».<sup>50</sup>

The foster parents were motivated to care for children by special rewards for good upbringing disbursed after longer periods of childcare. The wet nurses were rewarded after a whole year of breastfeeding, the main bonus used to be paid when the foster care ended, after the child's sixth or tenth birthday. The amounts used to vary, the Prague hospital even published a systematic rule for awarding in 1905, designed to prevent a distribution of bonuses «by favouritism». Poverty and modesty were considered positively and not as a reason for any special financial support, as the Directive of Prague foundling hospital expressed in 1908: «Rewards to foster mothers are possible only for particularly

conscientious and deserving foster parents... Mere poverty without merit cannot be a criterion for receiving a reward».<sup>51</sup> Besides this, some philanthropic societies occasionally offer a benefit to poor children or directly to «generous» foster mothers.<sup>52</sup>

After years of care, foundlings were assumed to return to the hospital. The foster parents could ask to retain the child in their care for free or try to negotiate with the child's domicile some support for the next period. In each parish under analysis, it is possible to find an example of a child remaining with his or her foster family: usually with a very brief comment in the evidence, which represents the only document showing affection for the foundling.<sup>53</sup> In Hněvkovice, 1906, the foster parents of six-year-old Emilie Malý had followed the rule and accompanied her to the hospital on the day of her sixth birthday; soon they decided to return and «took her back from the hospital for free», although they had no promise for support either from the foundling hospital or from the domicile of the child.<sup>54</sup> Josef Lžička from Senožaty in 1899 requested municipal authorities to keep František Stieber, the foundling, in the foster care of his family, because they «love the boy, and he likes them».<sup>55</sup>

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It was normal to take care of several children in succession. However, foster parents sometimes became fonder of a particular one of them. Between 1901–1914, 385 abandoned children arrived in the parish of Ledeč nad Sázavou and 15 of them stayed with their foster families for free after they had reached maturity. Nine of these fifteen families had accepted another foundling for a limited time. So, individual affection or attachment might play a role in these cases.<sup>56</sup> Examples of childless couples longing for a foundling to fulfil their desire for a child are generally very rare: the only example from the region studied is from 1853, when the priest of Dolní Dvořiště confirmed the moral integrity of František Pachler and his wife to enable them to take a child from the Linz foundling home.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, several proofs of indifference or even maltreatment have emerged, although there is no evidence, in the regions under analysis, of any serious crime against a foundling, such as neglect of care leading to death. The families caring for a foundling were usually poor and often affected by social problems. Foster parents who misappropriated money destined for the child were certainly not exceptional. The documents they used to receive upon taking in a foundling, and which they were expected to present on collecting the allowances, often became objects of pawning. In the case heard in the district court in Humpolec in 1894, which concerned the cessation of payments of money sent for a foundling, a priest from Senožaty, who was entrusted with distributing the sum remitted by the hospital, even acted as an intermediary. Instead of passing the money to the foster parents, he handed the amount over

to their creditor; his acting came to light only because of a conflict between the debtors and the man who had lent them the money.<sup>58</sup>

In 1900, the priest of Lipnice nad Sázavou was deceived by the foster parents, who claimed to him they had returned their ward to the foundling home in Vienna. In reality, the foster parents kept the six-year-old girl at home and took advantage of her forcing her to do unpaid work: the girl had to work as a nanny and housemaid instead of going to school. Her continuing presence in the parish was discovered by the village teacher, who succeeded in getting the girl to start attending school. Several months later he alerted the priest that the foster parents «hardly care for her needs; they have not even bought her a spelling book yet, and her clothing is very shabby, although quite clean». The teacher also pointed out the fact, that the same family was simultaneously taking care of another foundling and that the money really represented for them the key motivation in caring for the children entrusted to them. The biological parents of the mentioned boy paid them «regularly and fairly well for the care. Therefore, they value the boy and send him to school diligently».<sup>59</sup>

Neglect of school attendance could be quite a common problem. Although compulsory education for all was decreed by Empress Maria Theresa as early as in 1774, the implementation of this reform remained problematic especially in the poor villages, when the parents often preferred to keep their children working at home.<sup>60</sup> In 1899, five children from the Vienna foundling house were supposed to attend school in Budíkov, and only two of them could be confirmed by the teacher to be in good health and attending school regularly. In the same parish of Lipnice nad Sázavou, a young foundling became a thief, supported by his foster parents. In 1899, he was removed from their care, because «due to poor upbringing, he was morally led astray and is in danger of complete moral ruin». The foster parents themselves allegedly accepted the goods he had stolen and were therefore also found guilty and punished.<sup>61</sup>

### Preliminary conclusions

A longer research journey is needed to achieve a thorough, comprehensive understanding of the living conditions and social perception of abandoned children placed in foster care with rural families. The probe presented here into the environment of Bohemian foothills regions has uncovered some fundamental aspects of the daily lives of foundlings; but, at the same time, it has raised many further questions. The research is significantly limited by diverse and unevenly preserved sources. So, inevitably, we have to focus on separate pieces of information.

The analysis confirmed that foster care was financially motivated, so it was generally typical of poor, often mountainous country regions without profitable agriculture or industry. The administration of the Prague Foundling Hospital was even afraid that improving the social situation in the countryside, increased industrialisation and mobility, would lead to a shortage of foster families.<sup>62</sup> In some villages, for example Sv. Jan pod Malší and Zahrádka, fostering was evidently a regular source of livelihood or welcome supplementary income. However, ongoing research shows that foster care was less popular in the regions observed than in Central Bohemia, which was naturally more connected to Prague and where foster care could even represent a form of local «business».<sup>63</sup>

Currently, it is not possible to distinguish or explain any potential differences in fostering between parishes in Šumava and Novohradské Hory and the Českomoravská vrchovina. Geographical preferences are the exception: thus, indeed, prospective foster parents from the Havlíčkův Brod and Pelhřimov districts travelled mostly to Prague, while the residents of the Krumlov and Budějovice regions headed to the nearby Linz; the Vienna foundling home was equally accessible from all the areas analysed. Nevertheless, sharp differences in the number of foundlings inside particular regions are hard to explain. Besides distance and accessibility of a foundling hospital, another key factor worth considering is the development of a network of foster parents in the neighbourhood, who would be able to exchange information about the opportunities and conditions of fostering, or, for example, to set out together on a journey to the land capital to pick up a baby from the hospital. The negative influence could have come from the dismissive attitude of local authorities, whether priests or municipal representatives, who often saw foundlings as a potential social problem and as a task outside their standard duties.<sup>64</sup>

The obvious prevalence of poorer households among foster families naturally determined the living standards of the environment in which the children were placed. Child labour in the village society, «help» domestically or in fields, was considered normal even in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, strict upbringing and instilling modesty in children were regarded as desirable also in relatively affluent families. The foster parents' approach to the child and its education cannot be generalised at all. «Parental» affection for the foundling was not excluded; but nor was neglect or maltreatment. The author's personal impression of village fostering in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bohemia is that the situation of abandoned children was hard but not hopeless, and that the social system in which they lived worked quite satisfactorily.

In opening: Children on the bridge in Pelhřimov, Bohemian-Moravian Highlands, beginning of the 20th century. Muzeum Vysočiny Pelhřimov, p.o., inv. no. F159-Rx3354.

1 The paper is an output of the Czech Science Foundation's grant project 24-11382S *Nalezenci. Péče o děti bez rodičů ve venkovském prostředí 19. století*.

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19 An overview of recent research is provided by M. Lenderová et al., *Velké dějiny zemí Koruny české. Dětství*, Prague 2021.

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22 Pawłowsky (as note 15), pp. 28–30.

23 All documents are may be consulted in Národní archiv, Zemská porodnice a nalezinec [National Archive in Prague, Land maternity and foundling hospital fund]. The archive of the foundling hospital in Brno is much more modest: Moravský zemský archiv Brno, Zemský nalezinec a sirotčinec Brno [Moravian Land Archive in Brno, Land foundling hospital and orphanage fund].

24 Unequal is also the state of preservation and accessibility of parish archives that have been deposited in the state archives since the 1950s. While in the South Bohemia district, the parish archives are carefully catalogued and opened to researchers, the situation is more complicated in other regions.

25 Státní okresní archiv České Budějovice, Farní úřad Sv. Jan nad Malší [State regional archive České Budějovice, Parish archive Sv. Jan nad Malší fund].

26 Státní okresní archiv Český Krumlov, Farní úřad Dolní Dvořiště; Farní řad Horní Dvořiště, Farní úřad Kaplice; Farní úřad Rožmberk n. Vltavou.

27 Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Golčův Jeníkov; Farní úřad Hněvkovice; Farní úřad Ledeč n. Sázavou; Farní úřad Lipnice nad Sázavou; Farní úřad Zahrádka.

28 Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Mladé Bříště, Farní úřad Senožaty; Farní úřad Želiv.

29 General information about the parishes is gathered from J. G. Sommer, *Das Königreich Böhmen. Taberer Kreis*, Prague 1842; J. Růžková et al., *Historický lexikon obcí České republiky, 1869–2005*, Prague 2004.

30 For example, Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Senožaty, inventory no. 99, kar. 15 (a rule from 1851); Státní okresní archiv Český Krumlov, Farní úřad Dolní Dvořiště, inventory no. 287, ref. no. 3/4//1, kar. 6 (protocols of fostering).

31 Národní archiv, Zemská porodnice a nalezinec, inventory no. 1171–1172.

32 *Ibid.*, books no. 939 and 940.

33 Výroční zpráva, appendix – map.

34 Státní okresní archiv Písek, Farní úřad Kovářov, inventory no. 133, sign IIIb/5, kar 9 (the rule published by the Foundling Hospital in Prague in 1873).

35 Hrušková Mašínová (as note 8).

36 Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Mladé Bříště, inventory no. 94, kar. 3.

37 Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Zahrádka, inventory no. 15 and 16.

38 *Ibid.*, Farní úřad Golčův Jeníkov, inventory no. 13.

39 Pawłowsky (as note 5), pp. 199–251.

40 Svobodný (as note 18).

41 Státní okresní archiv České Budějovice, Farní úřad Svatý Jan pod Skalou, inventory no. 54, 59, and 60.

42 Státní okresní archiv Písek, Farní úřad Bernartice, inventory no. 86, sign IIIb/5.

43 Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Senožaty, inventory no. 99.

44 Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Hněvkovice, inventory no. 33.

45 Národní archiv, Zemská porodnice a nalezinec, inventory no 1172.

46 Among five foster families in Želiv, there were three tenants of a small plot of land (cottagers), an inn-keeper and the above-mentioned coachman working for the monastery, which was the feudal lord of the village. The foundlings housed there were born in 1844–1845, the age gap between foundlings and their closest foster siblings was 2.5–6 months, in one case 1.5 years.

47 Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Želiv, inventory no. 60.

48 Státní okresní archiv Český Krumlov, Farní úřad Dolní Dvořiště, inventory no. 287, ref. no. 3/4//1.

49 Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Hněvkovice, inventory no. 33.

50 *Ibid.*, Farní úřad Lipnice nad Sázavou, inventory no. 45.

51 *Pravidla ohledně udělování odměn svědomitým a vzorným pěstounkám ředitelstvím král. Česk. Zemského porodnice a nelezince v Praze*, Prague 1905.

52 K. Hrušková Mašínová, Lidumilství české; Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Senožaty, inventory no. 100, kar. 15.

53 The diverse quality of foster care – ranging from warm emotional bonds to neglect – is also documented in reports from Savoy: G. Brunet, A. Bideau, E. Rappalini, «Grandir sans famille: enfants et adolescents assistés en Haute-Savoie au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle»,

in: J. P. Bardet (ed.), *Lorsque l'enfant grandit, Entre dépendance et autonomie*, Paris 2003, pp. 901–914.

**54** Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Hněvkovice, inventory no. 33.

**55** Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Senožaty, inventory no. 99.

**56** Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Ledeč nad Sázavou, inventory no. 18.

**57** Státní okresní archiv Český Krumlov, Farní úřad Dolní Dvořiště, inventory no. 287, ref. no. 3/4//1.

**58** Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Senožaty, inventory no. 99.

**59** Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Lipnice nad Sázavou, inventory no. 45.

**60** Lenderová/Rýdl (as note 12), pp. 170–185.

**61** Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, Farní úřad Lipnice nad Sázavou, inventory no. 45.

**62** Národní archiv, Zemská porodnice a nalezinec, inventory no 1172.

**63** Hrušková Mašínová (as note 8), p. 37.

**64** Státní okresní archiv Pelhřimov, Farní úřad Mladé Bříště, inventory no. 94.



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Fig. 1. The village family spinning flax in Mysletín, Pelhřimov District, Bohemian-Moravian Highlands.  
Foto by Karel Bauer (1914), deposited in Muzeum Vysočiny Pelhřimov, p.o., inv. no. F893-8685.