

MATILDA AVILIO

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE  
AND DEEDS OF FATHER  
**MARIO BORRELLI**



ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA



PALAEPOLIS

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*Cover photo*  
Mario Borrelli in London with his pupils, 1959.  
*Courtesy of*  
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his might come as a surprise to you, but his name was Mario Alfredo Borrelli! (Naples 1922 - Oxford 2007). He was an Italian Catholic priest, social worker, and educator who spent his life supporting people in need. When he was still very young, that is soon after the World War II, he became very concerned with the situation of street urchins (between 6-20-year-old) swarming in the alleys of Naples.

During WWII, Naples endured the highest number of air raids among Italian cities. The bombings caused extensive destruction and impacted the population severely, increasing homelessness and poverty especially among children.

Father Borrelli wanted to help these children and take them off the streets. So, he came up with this plan: instead of approaching the children dressed as a priest, he wore rags to disguise himself as a tramp or vagrant. So, one night he met a group of kids and managed to gain their trust day by day to the point that he became their *gang leader*. Borrelli slept with them in the rough, helped them pick pocket on

public transports and steal food. During those weeks he had a very tough time: every early morning he would celebrate mass into his parish church, then would go to school to teach, and back again in the streets with his companions. The priest was exhausted, he thought he could not carry on...

...meanwhile father Borrelli found a damaged building and with the help of another priest, restored it to make it habitable. After that he said to his companions: "I have found a building that we can use as a shelter for the time being, so we no longer have to sleep in the streets." His boys accepted and moved into this building. But once this was settled, Borrelli had to face a new issue. His superior (the Cardinal of Naples) told him it was time for him to reveal his real identity to his kids. So, one day Borrelli wore his priestly clothes and revealed who he really was. At first the children were incredulous, they thought he was joking. They started to circle around him saying: 1... 2... 3... 4... 6... 9... to make fun of him. But Borrelli got angrier and angrier until he could take it no more. After a while they understood he was not mucking them about, and yet they were

still puzzled as they could not understand why the priest had acted like one of them. Some of them felt like they had been betrayed and decided to leave the house. Others instead remained with the priest.

Borrelli suggested that they could collect dismissed object and scrap iron from the street, fix them, and sell them to make their own living. Moreover, he provided his kids school education and tried to find jobs (or for most of them at least). The story of Borrelli and his fellow companions became widely known, to the point that the bestselling Australian author Morris West travelled to Naples to learn more about his story. West sojourned in Naples for around two years and befriended Mario and his gang. From this touching experience West wrote the book *Children of the sun* (1957), which was a best seller and was translated into many different languages. A year later, in 1958, the film *Don Vesuvio* was made to tell the story of this brave priest and his boys. Many people and charities from all over the world learned about this story and supported Borrelli's project sending him donations. Even Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the US president

Franklin Delano Roosevelt became one of his top supporters.

Thanks to these donations Borrelli was able to build a more comfortable shelter which was called THE HOUSE OF THE STREET URCHINS. Borrelli made connections with people in other countries, especially England. He took his children to the UK where he found families willing to accommodate them for weeks several times a year. It was thanks to these life changing experiences, that his kids learned English, found a job and became more hopeful about the future.

I am happy to say that one of my friends was Borrelli's favourite pupil. His name is Salvatore Di Maio. Salvatore was an officer at Naples City council where he oversaw the relationship with the European union because he knew English. Also, he translated into the Italian language Morris West's *Children of the Sun*.

Most of Borrelli's pupils managed to leave a dignified life: some went to university, and found jobs in Italy or abroad, others became social workers thus continuing Borrelli's mission.

Mario Borrelli was also engaged in other causes to support disadvantaged people. In fact, in the 1960s he lived for 6 months in a temporary camp with people who had been on a waiting list for a long time to receive a house. He suffered the cold, hunger, but in the end with his protest he obtained a house for them.

In the second part of his life Borrelli returned to the lay state and moved to England, where he worked as a social worker and dealt with the training of apprentice social workers. Also, he was appointed honorary librarian at Oxford which allowed him to continue his research on Latin documents. In 1977, Borrelli co-founded the Italian Peace Research Institute (IPRI), which was affiliated to IPRA, the International Peace Research Association.

Mario Borrelli died in Oxford but was buried in Naples. And now I conclude the story of Mario Alfredo Borrelli, also known as Don Vesuvio, because he was tireless and had as much power and energy as a volcano.



*A homeless child sleeping in the rough in Naples, 1950s. From Borrelli, *A Street Lamp and the Stars*.*

*Mario Borrelli in disguise (2nd from left). From Borrelli, *A Street Lamp and the Stars*.*



*Mario Borrelli reveals his identity.  
From *Il bacio del sole*.  
*Don Vesuvio* (1958).*

*Finally in the open:  
Father Mario Borrelli among  
his children. From Borrelli,  
*A Street Lamp and the Stars*.*



*Street urchins at work: scrap iron collection. From Borrelli, A Street Lamp and the Stars.*

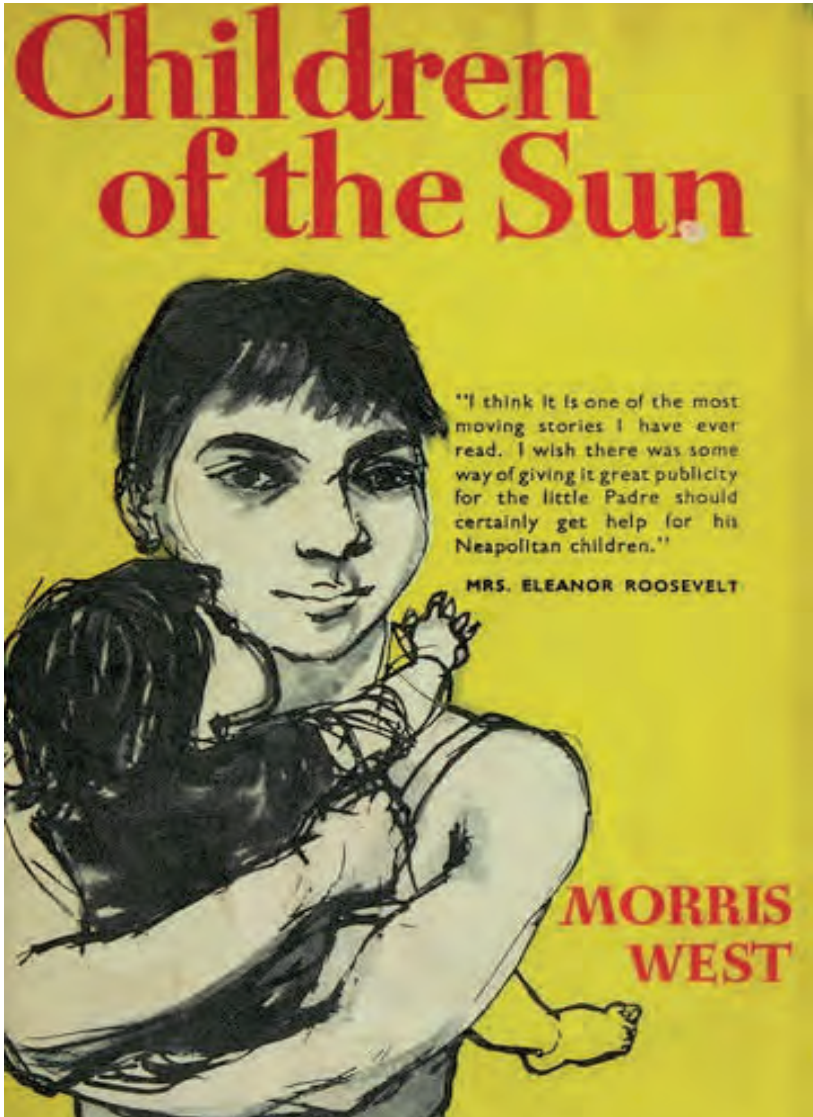


*Recreation time at the House of  
the street urchin.*  
Courtesy of Salvatore Di Maio.

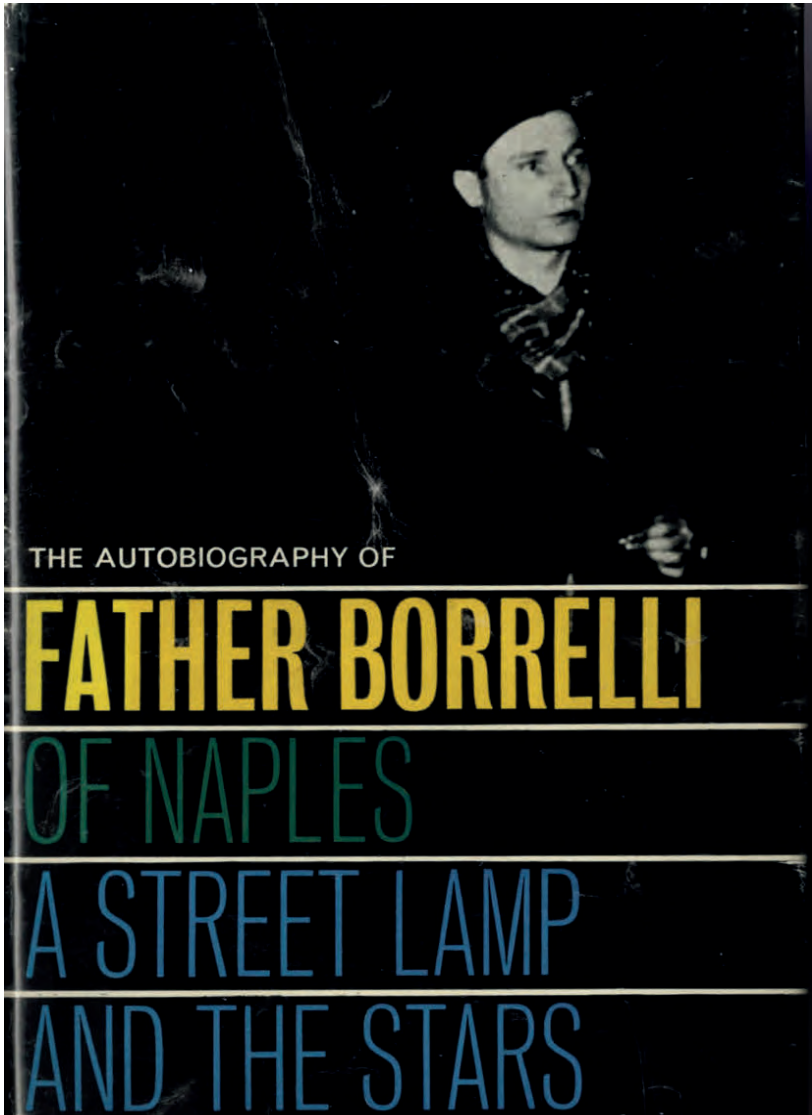
*Sailing to Dover!, 1959.*  
Courtesy of  
Salvatore Di Maio.



Morris West, *Children of the Sun*,  
book cover of the 1st UK edition 1957  
with Eleanor Roosevelt's endorsement.



Mario Borrelli,  
*A Street Lamp and the Stars*, 1963.



*Matilda and her friend  
Salvatore Di Maio (one of Borrelli's pupils),  
Naples 17 December 2024.*



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**MARIO BORRELLI** (Naples 1922 - Oxford 2007) was an Italian Catholic priest, social worker, educator, and researcher who spent his life supporting people in need. He is best known as the founder of the House of the Street Urchin in Naples (early 50s), which he created to offer a shelter and support to youth at risk. Later, he moved to the UK where he spent the rest of his life promoting initiatives focused on peace research. In 1977, Borrelli co-founded the Italian Peace Research Institute (IPRI), which was affiliated to IPRA, the International Peace Research Association.

**MATILDA AVILIO** is 9 years old and is in year 4 at St Anthony's Catholic Primary School, in Leamington Spa. She loves reading and drawing, and she is learning to play the trumpet. This is Matilda's first book ever!