

The Feltrinelli Family Archives

by *Lorenzo Pezzica*

Introduction

As part of the project of reorganization and valorization of the archival patrimony by the Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Foundation, a series of archives of remarkable historical and cultural value have been made available for public consultation since March 2009. These archives belong to the Feltrinelli Family and may be considered, for their size and quality, among the most relevant archives for financial and cultural history of 19th and 20th Italian century.

The Family

Feltrinelli has been one of the most important families of the Milanese and Italian industrial and financial bourgeoisie, playing a major role in Italy's economic and social development between the 19th and the 20th century.

Since 1857, Milan has been their city of residence and working operations; however, the origin of the family is not from there. The Feltrinelli family came from Gargnano, a town on the western shore of Lake Garda in the province of Brescia and, before that, from Feltre, in Veneto.

Feltrinelli's patrimony was created initially through timber commerce, when in 1846 Giacomo Feltrinelli (1829-1913), son of Faustino Feltrinelli (1781-1848), set up the company "Fratelli Feltrinelli", increasing substantially along with the development of the Italian railway in the 1870s and 1880s. Later on, the patrimony consolidated even more along with the urban and real estate growth of Milan and of many other Italian cities, beginning with Rome, while in the 1890s, there was the first shifting from its commercial and real estate activities to financial ones with the establishing of a bank. Thus, from the beginning of the 20th century to the end of the Second World War, the center of the Feltrinelli's economic venture doubled and the activity in the credit and financial field increased.

On 26th February 1913 Giacomo Feltrinelli died. At his death, the reins of the company and of all the interests were taken over by his grandnephew Carlo (1881-1935), first son of Giovanni Feltrinelli (1855-1896) and Maria von Pretz, who, in the first three decades of the 20th century, would become one of the most charismatic figures of Italian and international capitalism. With the death of Carlo Feltrinelli, in 1935, the management of the business was taken over by his brother Antonio, who became the new leader until his death in 1942.

The Feltrinelli embody every aspect of the perfect entrepreneurial Milanese family of the 19th century¹. They are, on the one hand, an entrepreneurial bourgeois family with an extended structure, while on the other hand, as a compact productive unit, are able to form a closely cooperative relationship between family and business so that, from the very beginning, there has always been a strong identification between the family name and the company.

The most important aspects of the Feltrinelli family history include the continuity of the company, the awareness of their productive capacity and of the work ethic, and the search for innovation and technical progress; it may be said that the family personifies all aspects of an entrepreneurial ideology.

Another fundamental emblem of the Feltrinelli family is the building in Via Andegari in Milan. Bought by Giacomo Feltrinelli, in the second half of the 19th century, the building became the center of the life and the history of the family as well as of their entrepreneurial activities. Via Andegari is not only the private home of many family members but it is also the Headquarters of some of their companies: from Fratelli Feltrinelli to Banca Feltrinelli. Uninterruptedly, the building in Via Andegari, the present Headquarters of the Foundation and of the Giangiacomo Feltrinelli publishing house, has been the heart of the family activities, together with other family-owned properties, in particular those in Gargnano and Rome.

The Archives

The archives of the Feltrinelli family allows us to outline all the above mentioned family characteristics. At present, under the division named “Archives Feltrinelli Family”, there are eight archival fonds made up of records dating back to the period between 1840 to 1954, and 391 envelopes (for a total of 2.298 files and 523 dossiers) as well as 196 registers:

- I. Administration of Feltrinelli Fond (1840-1954);
- II. Giacomo Feltrinelli Fond (1865-1911);
- III. Giovanni Feltrinelli Fond (1876-1896);
- IV. Carlo Feltrinelli Fond (1901-1935);
- V. Banca Feltrinelli Fond (1883-1923);
- VI. Factory in Bernareggio for wood manufacturing Fond (1904-1924);
- VII. Italian-Hungarian company for forest enterprises Fond (1907-1913);
- VIII. Building company and land enterprises Fond (1907-1948).

The archives are open to the public and their inventories are available online from the website of the Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Foundation.

The records preserved concern mainly the movables, the real estate and the finance affairs of the family; there are also records attesting to both the professional activities of some of its members and the activities of some of the most important Feltrinelli companies.

The most consistent fond is that of the Feltrinelli Administration, set at the beginning of the 20th century by Carlo Feltrinelli, with the specific task of managing the patrimony of the family and whose headquarters were in Via Andegari. The fond, comprised of sixteen series, preserves the records regarding the notarial deeds, originals or legalized copies, of the movables and real estates

¹See CECILIA DAU NOVELLI, *Modelli di comportamento e ruoli familiari nella borghesia imprenditoriale milanese nella seconda metà dell'800*, in «Orientamenti sociali», 2, May-August 1981, pages 39-50.

of the family (deed of sales, mortgage deeds, inheritance deeds, but also correspondence, handwritten notes, certificates, drawings and plans of the real estates and of the lands), the administrative management of the companies, of the lands (precisely, the lands Remedello, Sorbara and Bresciani, in the provinces of Brescia and Mantova) and of the many buildings in Milan, Rome, Gargnano and other Italian and foreign locations.

In particular, the 19th century records of the fond retrace the most significant moments in the creation of the family patrimony.

The fond also preserves extensive correspondence of some members, Carlo and Antonio Feltrinelli, Maria von Pretz, the heirs of Carlo Feltrinelli (the sons Giangiacomo and Antonella and the wife Giannalisa Gianzana) and the heirs of Francesco Feltrinelli. The correspondence refers to the relations with the coworkers, companies, ministries, private and public institutions, individuals, cultural institutions, associations, movements and political parties, banks, the management of the movables and of the financial affairs of the Feltrinelli family. The records consist of letters, telegrams and minutes, even if there are also records of a completely different nature, frequently enclosed with the correspondence or as a completion of it: these include convocations of the ordinary general meeting of various companies, agendas, statements of account, reports and balance sheets, press-cuttings, leaflets and drawings.

The personal fonds of Giacomo, Giovanni and Carlo Feltrinelli, the three main authors of the family fortunes, attest to their intensive professional and entrepreneurial activity. In particular, the fonds of Giacomo and Giovanni Feltrinelli contain records of the period between 1865 and 1911, augmenting the records concerning the beginning of the activities and the first important entrepreneurial results of the family.

Extremely relevant is the Carlo Feltrinelli fond, divided in thirteen series, preserving entrepreneurial and professional records, ascribable to the various interests and activities of Carlo Feltrinelli, along with a small but significant part of private and family records, attesting to important events of his personal life.

The position and the importance of Carlo Feltrinelli in the balance of the Italian capitalism, especially in the first 30 years of the 20th century, give the records, especially the professional ones, an importance which goes beyond its specific interests. Indeed, the fond contains records concerning his most important professional appointments, the presidency of Edison, the representation, on behalf of the Italian Government, at Reichsbanch in Berlino and the presidency of the Credito Italiano. On this point, it is important to point out the interesting collection of letters between Carlo Feltrinelli and Carlo Orsi.

No less important, even if less complete, the fonds of the companies such as the one of Banca Feltrinelli (1915-1918) and the one of Società italo-ungherese per imprese forestali (1907-1913), which still preserve the letter books in excellent condition.

All records of the eight archival fonds represent an important source, not only for the history of the family, but also for the Italian economic and financial history between the first half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. These records give back to the family their rightful historical importance, placing them among the most important entrepreneurial families of that time.