

JOSEPH FRANK PLAINFIELD PAPERS

AR 821



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Joseph Frank Plainfield Papers

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Summary

Main Entry: Joseph Frank Plainfield Papers

Date Span: 1909 – 1969

Abstract: An Italian-born Catholic, Joseph Plainfield became a U. S. Citizen, converted to the Baptist faith, and with his wife, Alice, was a Baptist missionary to Italians in America under the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Size: 1.75 linear ft. (4 boxes)

Collection #: AR 821

Biographical Sketch

Giuseppe Francesco Piani was born October 15, 1880 in Martinego, Province Bergamo, Lombardy, Italy into a modest, typically Italian catholic family. Later, in 1921, when he became a naturalized United States citizen, his given names were translated and his surname transliterated to become Joseph Frank Plainfield.

Plainfield was the youngest of four children, three boys and a girl, born to his father's first wife who died when he was quite small. Although he was never in actual want, he suffered mental anguish as a small child from his step-mother, a much younger woman than his father, and from controlling, domineering aunts who were given charge of his upbringing and schooling.

Giuseppe's oldest brother, William, became a catholic priest, and later archbishop, of the Philippines. His middle brother left home early and opted for a mechanical arts education, and his sister was scheduled to become a nun, but never did. It was assumed that the younger brother would follow in the older brother's footsteps.

Throughout his home training and public education, Piani found himself rebelling against the strict authority of his catholic upbringing, supervised by his aunts, in his father's long absences on business trips. His sensitive nature made him aware of his sins, yet he questioned the power of the priests to forgive sin.

In his 89th year, Plainfield wrote his memoirs. He tells about the great struggle he had from a very early age in his life about his sinful state: "it was the most defeating experience of my whole life. No pope, no priest, can authoritatively or biblically say: 'I

absolve thee from thy sins,' even in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, (sic) but only the power of an experience of forgiveness by grace of Jesus Christ who alone can say: 'Thy sin is forgiven, go and sin no more.'"

"But the change of heart (spiritually thinking) so given and demonstrated in my life through faith and deeds, never was actually granted and felt, and I never did actually meet the conditions enunciated by Christ so often in his approach to sinners. And I said to myself, while longing to feel and possess God's forgiveness: 'I know I am a sinner, o God, and please help me to find the peace that only thy power can offer, by whatever means asked of me, whether by doing some great, noble deeds, or self-inflicted suffering as a punishment for my sins.'"

Piani went to the same college, Valdocco Salesian College, as his older brother and took an academic course. Later he entered the novitiate seminary at Foglizzo Canavese, where he entered the Salesian order to prepare for the priesthood. At the time, the Italian government required two years of military service of all its young men. While Piani was struggling with his conscience on whether he wanted to fully enter the priesthood, he taught school in Italy and, through the influence of the church, was sent as a missionary to join the faculty of the College of Sacred Heart of Jesus in Recife, State of Pernambuco, Brazil.

In 1904, Piani became caught up in the ideological clash between Catholics and Protestants in the territory of Pernambuco. He was visibly moved at the persecution aimed at the evangelical leaders, especially a Southern Baptist career missionary and converted Jew named Solomon Ginsburg. After continued prayerful meditation, he secretly wrote and requested a clandestine midnight meeting with Ginsburg, who, because of exhaustion, had returned to the United States for rest. His request was met, however, by the newly arrived Southern Baptist missionary, William Henry Cannada, native of South Carolina. Cannada met the young teacher-priest in training, witnessed to him and guided him through a spiritual pilgrimage to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in the free pardon of sin. Piani's conversion was followed by baptism at the hand of Cannada in 1904 in the Baptist church in Recife. Piani co-founded with Cannada the Baptist school in Recife, which for a time was financially underwritten by the police chief of Greenville, SC.

Because of his previous education, his intellect, his dedication to the cause of missionary work, and his promise of usefulness in the kingdom, Ginsburg made it possible for Piani to return to the United States and attend one year of English study at William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri. Piani studied at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and graduated with the Th.d. degree in 1911.

While in Texas at an encampment where he was teaching missions, he met Alice Lucas, whom he courted and eventually persuaded to marry him and accompany him to Recife, Brazil as a missionary teacher. Piani was rejected as a career missionary by the Foreign Mission Board, according to his memoirs, because was not a native born U. S. citizen (at the time and in the same area, Solomon Ginsburg and Erik Nelson were both serving as

career missionaries of the Southern Baptist Convention and neither was American born nor American citizens.)

From his marriage in 1912 to her death in 1940, Mrs. Elizabeth Lucas, Piani's mother-in-law, lived harmoniously in the home and assisted in their missionary endeavors. Mrs. Piani/Plainfield suffered one miscarriage, but never gave birth to children.

Mrs. Piani returned from Brazil in 1913 because of ill health, but Dr. Piani and Mrs. Lucas stayed on until July, 1915 when they returned to Texas. Dr. Piani received and accepted offers from the Home Mission Board of the Northern Baptist Convention in Barre, Vermont (1915 – 1917) and Newark, NJ (1917 – 1923).

In 1923, Dr. Plainfield joined the City Baptist Mission of St. Louis, Missouri, where he stayed until 1926. He then became director of mission work with Italians and other foreign nationalities in Tampa, Florida, under the sponsorship of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, a position he held for 16 years.

Dr. and Mrs. Plainfield retired in 1946 and made their home in Cleveland, SC. In post retirement years, he served the Poe Mill Baptist Church, Greenville, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Travelers Rest, and the Sans Souci Baptist Church, Greenville.

Mrs. Plainfield died in January, 1969, after a marriage of 57 years. After her death, Dr. Plainfield moved to Travelers Rest, SC, wrote his unpublished memoirs, and died in 1976 at the age of 96.

Scope and Content Notes

The Plainfield Papers are mostly personal, hand-written letters and photographs, with approximately 90 per cent of the letters to his wife. Many of the letters describe in detail his location, what he is doing, and how the people are responding, giving an understanding and feel for the important missionary work he is doing with people from his native country with similar upbringing and a common language. The letters that cover the period 1909 through 1947 are written primarily in English, although some are in Italian and Portuguese.

In his unpublished memoirs (autobiography), a copy of which is contained in the collection, Plainfield pays tribute to the witness and ministry of the Waldensians, followers of Waldo the reformer, in their great religious fervor to "...bring the Italian nation to Christ..." often under the persecution of death imposed by the political house of Savoy and sanctioned by the Roman Catholic authorities.

Southern Baptist career foreign missionaries mentioned in the collection are: William H. Cannada, W. T. Entzminger, Solomon Ginsburg, David L. Hamilton, Jephthah E. Hamilton, Alva B. Langston, John W. Shepard, and Erik Nelson. Others mentioned are J. B. Lawrence, Una Roberts Lawrence, J. B. Love, and R. J. Willingham.

The collection comprises four archival boxes, about 1.75 linear feet. The papers are arranged in alphabetical order by folder title. Photographs are designated as groups, individuals, and scenes. Material in the collection was acquired from the North American Mission Board (formerly Home Mission Board) of the Southern Baptist Convention. Additions to the collection are not anticipated.

References

Books

Allen, Clifton J. (editor). *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Volume IV*, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1982.

Plainfield, Joseph Frank. *Memories in the Life of Dr. Joseph F. Plainfield*, unpublished, undated.

Plainfield, Joseph Frank. *The Stranger Within our Gates*, Atlanta, GA: Home Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, N.D.

International Mission Board Correspondence

William H. Cannada, Box 12

W. T. Entzminger, Box 20

Soloman Ginsburg, Box 23

David L. Hamilton, Box 26

Jephthah E. Hamilton, Box 26

Alba B. Langston, Box 32

Erik Nelson, Box 42

John W. Shepard, Box 53

Arrangement

Arranged in alphabetical order by folder title

Provenance

Preferred Citation

Joseph Frank Plainfield Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee

Access Restrictions

None

Subject Terms

Ginsburg, Solomon I., 1867 – 1927

Plainfield, Alice Lucas

Southern Baptist Convention. Home Mission Board.

Missionaries – Correspondence, reminiscences, etc.

Home missions

Missions to Italians

Related Materials

Plainsfield, Joseph F. *Memories in the life of Dr. Joseph F. Plainfield*, 1955.

Container List

Box 1

- 1.1 Addresses/Sermons/Speeches
- 1.2 Articles
- 1.3 Assets
- 1.4 Baptist Beacon
- 1.5 Baylor College
- 1.6 Blue Bonnett – Baylor College, Belton, TX, 1907
- 1.7 Brazil – Recife
- 1.8 Brazil – Rio De Janeiro
- 1.9 Cannada, Edith
- 1.10 Clippings
- 1.11 Correspondence, 1909
- 1.12 Correspondence, 1911
- 1.13 Correspondence, 1914
- 1.14 Correspondence, 1933
- 1.15 Correspondence, 1936
- 1.16 Correspondence, 1937, January – June
- 1.17 Correspondence, 1937, July – December
- 1.18 Correspondence, 1938
- 1.19 Correspondence, 1939
- 1.20 Correspondence, 1940
- 1.21 Correspondence, 1941
- 1.22 Correspondence, 1943
- 1.23 Correspondence, 1944
- 1.24 Correspondence, 1945

Box 2

- 2.1 Correspondence, 1946
- 2.2 Correspondence, 1947
- 2.3 Converted Catholic
- 2.4 Dimaggio, Frank – “Il Sentiero Di Sangue”
- 2.5 Dunham, Marion
- 2.6 Ezell, S. J.
- 2.7 Ginsburg, Solomon
- 2.8 Goodwill Center, Ensley, Al
- 2.9 Hightower
- 2.10 Holly Ridge
- 2.11 Inni Christiani
- 2.12 Italy – Tirano (Turin)
- 2.13 Italy – Turin – Lucento Baptist Church
- 2.14 Jones, Henry D. – The Evangelical Movement Among Italians in New York City

- 2.15 La Mia Posizione Nella Chiesa E. Nella Democrazia
- 2.16 Lucas, Elizabeth (1862 – 1940)
- 2.17 Lucas Terrace
- 2.18 MacArthur, Douglas – Speeches in Texas
- 2.19 Mother – Tribute To Mrs. Elizabeth Lucas, by daughter Alice Plainfield
- 2.20 Mt. Vernon
- 2.21 Mussolini, Benito
- 2.22 Negatives
- 2.23 Novo Testamento
- 2.24 O Cantor Chrtistao

Box 3

- 3.1 Ordination
- 3.2 Phillips, J. A. – Catholic Intolerance
- 3.3 Photographs – Album I
- 3.4 Photographs – Album II
- 3.5 Photographs – Album – Tampa, Florida
- 3.6 Photographs – Buildings
- 3.7 Photographs – Family – American
- 3.8 Photographs – Family – Italian
- 3.9 Photographs – Groups
- 3.10 Photographs – Individuals
- 3.11 Photographs – Lucas, Elizabeth and Plainfield, Alice
- 3.12 Photographs – Plainfield, Alice and Frank
- 3.13 Photographs – Plainfield, Alice Josephine (Lucas)
- 3.14 Photographs – Plainfield, Joseph Frank

Box 4

- 4.1 Photographs – Scenes
- 4.2 Photographs – Texas
- 4.3 Piani, Dante – Brother
- 4.4 Piani, William – Brother – Archbishop of Philippines
- 4.5 Plainfield, Alice Josephine (Lucas)
- 4.6 Plainfield, Alice (Lucas) – Drawing Book
- 4.7 Plainfield, Alice Josephine (Lucas) – Degree – see oversized flat file
- 4.8 Plainfield, Joseph Frank – A Brief Historical and Critical Exposition of Modernism – Dissertation
- 4.9 Plainfield, Joseph Frank – Degrees – see oversized flat file
- 4.10 Plainfield, Joseph Frank – Memories in the Life of Dr. Joseph F. Plainfield
- 4.11 Poetry
- 4.12 Post Cards – Pictures
- 4.13 Saxe, Grace – Studies In The Book of Acts
- 4.14 South Carolina – Greenville – Sans Souci Baptist Church
- 4.15 Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
- 4.16 Will – Elizabeth G. Lucas (Mother-in-Law)