

Farewell Rita Levi Montalcini: "I Am the Mind"

Judith Harris (January 03, 2013)



The Italian neurologist who won the Nobel prize for her work on cells, dies at the age of 103. Among the tributes pouring in from the world over was that of Italy's caretaker Premier Mario Monti, who called her "a charismatic woman who honored our nation." Nichi Vendola (left-wing politician and currently the President of Apulia) said that, "With her we lose one of the most crystalline and noble voices of democratic Italy."

ROME - For us Romans, Italy's famous scientist Rita Levi Montalcini, who died peacefully and quietly in Rome on Dec. 30 at age 103, was a familiar figure. She had won a Nobel Prize in 1986 for medicine for her discovery and identification of a growth factor in nerve fibers. She held five honorary degrees from foreign and Italian university and had received countless awards including from Brandeis and Columbia Universities. She was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as of Italy's Accademia Nazionale delle Scienze and the Accademia dei Lincei. She



was also well known as a strong supporter of the women's movement in Italy. And after 2001 we watched with admiration her carefully coiffed and well-dressed appearances in the Senate, to which Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi had named her for her lifetime.

Most of us also knew the dramatic backstory of her graduation in 1936 from the University of Turin with highest honors in medicine and surgery. Only two years later a Fascist law was passed that prohibited Jews from any role in politics, government, the military, entertainment, journalism and schools. Up to that point there had been little anti-Jewish sentiment in Italy, but now there was. Co-signed by ten Italian scientists, the law categorically excluded Levi Montalcini from continuing her post-graduate studies in neurology and psychiatry. For Levi Montalcini was a Jew, the daughter of an electrical engineer and mathematician named Adamo Levi and an artist, Adele Montalcini. As such she was ousted from the university.

Besides Hitler's influence, today's experts like Francesco Cassata, author of *La Difesa della Razza 1938-1943* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), consider this law an element in the creation of an artificial domestic enemy, promulgated in order to help the regime dodge the era's real problems. As of August 1938, the law was further justified in a bi-weekly magazine of that same name, *La Difesa della Razza* (The Defense of the Race). Edited by Giorgio Almirante, the magazine spread the word to its 85,000 subscribers that they were to avoid "biological contamination."

But Levi Montalcini had had to fight with her father in order to attend university at all, and neither sexism nor the era's rampant racism could stop her. Still at home in Turin, Levi Montalcini simply set up a scientific laboratory in her bedroom. There she conducted her research until 1941 when Turin was bombed by the Allies so extensively that the family fled into the Italian countryside. In the mountains near Asti, she recreated her miniscule bedroom laboratory and continued her research until 1943, when that area became the battleground between the Allies and the Germans. At that point the family fled once more, in a harrowing voyage southward to Florence and the home of a friend of Levi Montalcini's twin sister, Paola.

In 1944, after Florence was liberated by the allies following bitter fighting (and the Levi family had a close call), Rita went to work in an Allied military hospital. By that time, say historians, at least half of Italy's Jews had been deported and some 8,000, murdered. After the end of the war she spent three decades in universities in the United States before returning to Italy.

Levi Montalcini was a member of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei of Rome, whose president, Prof. Lamberto Maffei, had been one of her students. Speaking of her this week he called her, "A very noble woman who had a fragile look but was a giant in science has left us. Her research, which won the Nobel Prize, has dominated the minds of thousands of scientists who have carried on her research in laboratories throughout the world, and have brought to the study of the nervous system new knowledge and an epochal paradigm change." Today's students are applying her teachings to the prevention and cure of senile dementia and in particular to the study of Alzheimer's. "No one can forget her continued dedication to the development of scientific research and in particular her commitment to young researchers, and the great help she has given to the improvement of the condition of women, especially in Africa."

In fact, together with her sister Paola she created the Fondazione ONLUS Rita Levi-Montalcini, a foundation whose aim is to foster education particularly for women. (For information and donations, see: <http://www.ritalevimontalcini.org>.) "I decided to do this," she stated, "out of an awareness of the need to deal with the most serious problems that weigh upon the African populations: women's lack of access to education. Certainly it is a drop in the ocean in consideration of the other great suffering in Africa, but I am convinced that helping women to win the right to education will help them achieve the freedom of growth and development of the individual within their own society and in the global world."

Levi Montalcini was buried in a Jewish ceremony in Turin Jan. 2.

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To see an interview in Italian made in the year 2000, in which she explains her research, go to [>>>](#) [2]. In another video, made for her 101st birthday two years ago, she tells interviewer Riccardo Luna, in an oft-quoted phrase, that, "I am the mind. The body will do whatever it wants.... I lived so many years abroad, and when I returned I was so pleased with all Italy had to offer in terms of human capital. The human capital of the young people is the wealth of our country." See: [>>>](#) [3]

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[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/ritalevimontalcini1357255033jpg>

[2] <http://video.repubblica.it/dossier/addio-a-rita-levi-montalcini/rita-levi-montalcini-e-la-scoperta-che-le-valse-il-nobel/114977/113380?ref=NRCT-49677532-8>

[3] <http://video.repubblica.it/dossier/addio-a-rita-levi-montalcini/addio-a-rita-levi-montalcini-io-sono-la-mente-il-corpo-faccia-quello-che-vuole/114971?video>