

INTERVIEW

Education means freedom

This interview is a very heart-felt one for us of the Perini Journal. The protagonist is a woman who has marked an epoch. In this section of the magazine, we wish to dedicate space not only to the many different activities tied to the world of paper, but above all, to tell about life experiences, about people who, through their dedication, passion and joy have left and daily leave a trace of their enterprise and audacity. A space where words transmit history and humbly try to make people reflect, or simply tell their story with emotional transport. Professor Rita Levi-Montalcini turned 101 years old in April, and the Perini Journal had the honor of interviewing her.

Rita Levi-Montalcini, born in 1909, obtained her degree in Medicine at the Institute of Human Anatomy of the University of Turin. In 1986, she won the Nobel Prize for medicine for the discovery of a nerve growth factor – NGF – a protein molecule that plays an essential role in the growth and differentiation of sensory and sympathetic nerve cells. In 2001, she was named Senator for Life by the President of the Italian Republic.

Maura Leonardi

An example of tenacity, strength and conviction

An example of tenacity, strength and conviction. A woman who has always bravely fought for her ideas, challenging – in an educated way – a century where a woman did not have many rights. Antonio Battro, famous Argentinean journalist, in an article on “La Nación”, wrote about her: “There are not many people who possess intelligence and courage, sweetness and firmness, beauty and science, but Rita Levi-Montalcini is one of these”.

Today, she is still actively involved in the Foundation that bears her name, which has the scope of supplying a future to the young, in particular by helping African women in difficulty and who have no access to education. We are pleased to introduce you to the “Iron Lady”, or better, “The First Lady of Science”.

Perini Journal (PJL): In work, as well as in life, do you feel it is important to have a mix of intelligence/mind as the thinking and rational element, the heart as the symbol of passion and emotion, and courage as a feeling of strength and strong will?

Rita Levi-Montalcini (RL-M): I can say that in work, particularly in research, neither the degree of intelligence nor the capability of performing and correctly bringing to term the task undertaken, are the essential factors for personal success and satisfaction. A substantial tenacity in pursuing the direction that I feel is right and the indifference towards the difficulties that arise in realizing certain projects have helped me enormously – and still help me today – to face the difficult moments in life.

PJL: Women and enterprise. The condition of women has certainly improved in the industrial and social scenario, but there are still many gaps to fill. In your opinion, what is the proper advice to be given in order to improve this situation? How much still depends on women and how much depends on society as a whole?

RL-M: Today, as in the past, we are still governed by an almost exclusively male oligarchy. In those cases where woman have had a space, they have shown to be able to put extremely valid initiatives into practice, overcoming bureaucratic difficulties in the social and political field, and going against secular dogmas. I am convinced that it would be extremely important to avail ourselves of the female contribution to face the problems of the 21st century.

INTERVIEW

I am convinced that it would be extremely important to avail ourselves of the female contribution to face the problems of the 21st century.

PJL: According to one of your statements, the brain has no wrinkles: why?

RL-M: I feel that, once one reaches senility, if environmental conditions allow it, we can very well exercise activities that are perfectly in keeping with our aspirations. Every elderly person can continue to express his or her capabilities in other fields, if he or she has maintained the brain in full efficiency throughout life. My advice is not to arrive unprepared at retirement age, but to start practicing pleasurable activities during the years that precede retirement.

PJL: In the course of the years, you have attained many important goals. Which among them have given you unique joy?

RL-M: For me, receiving the title of Senator for Life is an even greater recognition than winning the Nobel Prize in Stockholm, because it comes from Italy, from my Country. I am very honored.

PJL: Culture as the key to development. Do you feel that today, the excess of technology or the wrong use of some means of communication negatively influences young people's curiosity and their passion for discovery?

RL-M: Being educated means being free. With the new technologies available, we can trigger off mechanisms of transformation that did not take place in a static society such as that of previous epochs, and which is still happening today. If young people use their reasoning capabilities to the fullest, they will be able to not only enhance their knowledge, but also to "explore" those fields that are today interconnected through computer science.

The history of mankind and that of science teaches us that difficulties have always improved man. For example, the past century was characterized by genocides and exterminations and it was not worse than others, dense with wars, massacres and slavery.

PJL: How has the Nobel Prize changed your professional and private life? What value did you attribute to it?

RL-M: Receiving this prize has influenced my life in two ways: notoriety has widened my "visibility" not only among those belonging to the scientific world, but has extended it also to those outside this sphere. This popularity has given me the possibility of publicly treating the negotiation of social issues. The negative aspect was that I was exposed to undesired publicity and to increasing requests to express my opinions which, unfortunately, were often reported in a way that is not in keeping with my ideas.

PJL: Man and his mind: how have they evolved and how are they evolving?

RL-M: The history of mankind and that of science teaches us that difficulties have always improved man. For example, the past century was characterized by genocides and exterminations and it was not worse than others, dense with wars, massacres and slavery. This century anticipates serious menaces: wars, the economic crisis, the rebirth of racism. But man has nonetheless continued to evolve and will evolve continuously because there will always be something to discover and something to know because "knowledge" is perhaps man's supreme good: without it, the other fundamental values which we constantly refer to cannot exist.

PJL: If you could go back in time, would you do everything as you did or would you change something in your life?

RL-M: I would not change anything. I did not renounce anything, even for what concerns marriage and motherhood. I wanted to dedicate myself totally to medicine and be independent: marriage requires sacrifices that I was not willing to make.

I would like to tell to the young not to be pessimistic because that would mean giving up even before starting out, and I would recommend to ban from one's goals the element of power, to discover the pleasure of living and to appreciate life in all its expressions.

PJL: If you could send a message to today's society, what would it be?

RL-M: More than to society, I would like to launch a message to the young, the protagonists of the society of the future. I would like to tell them not to be pessimistic because that would mean giving up even before starting

out, and I would recommend to ban from one's goals the element of power, to discover the pleasure of living and to appreciate life in all its expressions. To be interested in what surrounds us, thinking about others or those who have a desperate need for help, such as the populations in developing countries.

PJL: How important are ethics and morals in life and in one's profession?

RL-M: I retain they are supreme values and I would like to answer you with a maxim, which I have adopted as my own, by the great philosopher Immanuel Kant "The starry sky above and the moral law within". As a scientist, I feel that we must conform to honesty and objectivity, to the concepts that lie at the base of ethical systems. Research must be aimed exclusively at the well-being of persons and of the environment.

Believing in values and living bravely, honestly and objectively are messages that leave a mark. So for us it has been an honor to collect these sentences, the strength, the experience and the gentleness of a Lady of Science, a master of long life lived with great enthusiasm, vivacity and courage. •

The Rita Levi-Montalcini Foundation: a Future for African Women

The finality of the Rita Levi-Montalcini Foundation is to ensure a future to African women. One of the major problems that weighs on the populations of the southern portion of the world – and in particular on the African continent – is the lack of access to education for almost all women.

The Foundation's program has a twofold objective:

- the first is to help populations living in extremely indigent conditions.
- the second is to prevent that the tragic situations of these countries cause mass migrations and arouse other upsets on a global level.

Creativity and organizational efficiency, already demonstrated by young African women, can trigger mechanisms of social transformation, essential for themselves and for all of mankind. Education at all levels constitutes the most effective instrument to create a class of women that can assume directive roles on a social, political and scientific level; to exploit the possibilities offered by international cooperation programs; to educate the future generations. The development of countries having a high level of culture has demonstrated that education is the key to a country's progress.

As a beat of wings of a butterfly in the Amazon forest may cause, even at a distance of time, a hurricane in the opposite pole of the globe, so the aims of the Foundation Rita Levi-Montalcini Onlus, through the issue of scholarships to the most critical situations in Africa, may trigger mechanisms of radical transformation, reaped worldwide.

Rita Levi-Montalcini

<http://www.ritalevimontalcini.org>

