

Pressrelease
January 11, 2016

Untimely death of our friend and colleague
Giuseppe Castagnetti

"Lumaga lumaghin, tira fora i tò cornin, un par mè un par ti un par la vècia di san martin."

Dear friends and colleagues,

I just learned that my close friend Giuseppe Castagnetti is no longer with us. His sister Emilia wrote me that he died on January 7, 2016. We all have lost a great friend and an inspiring colleague.

On December 10, 2015 Giuseppe wrote me a last email in which he told me that his condition had worsened and that he had only six months left to live. I wrote back to him that everything would be arranged according to his wishes and that I wanted to remain close to him. Now I can be close to him only in my thoughts and feelings.

I met Giuseppe around 1977 when I began to study physics and all kinds of other things in Berlin. The way we met is strange. I wanted to learn Italian and was searching for a private tutor, also in the hope that I would make friends in a city that was new to me. I placed an ad in a Berlin event magazine and at the same time went to an evening course to learn French and asked my French teacher whether he knew anyone who could teach me Italian. I received only one answer to the ad and one recommendation from my French teacher: both were Giuseppe. Ever since this coincidence, I've always felt that our encounter was destiny. To my surprise it turned out that we shared many passions, among them an interest in the history and philosophy of science. Giuseppe had studied philosophy of science in Milan, and had been preparing a thesis on Lazzaro Spallanzani, an eighteenth-century pioneer physiologist. But he neglected his studies and left his thesis unfinished, volunteering instead to work with the Italian leftist journal "Il manifesto," then led by the well-known journalist Rossana Rossandra. As he told me, he eventually left the journal because he felt exploited and politically misguided by its leaders whom he considered to be naive enthusiasts. Giuseppe was always politically interested, with a critical and acute mind and his heart beating on the left side, but felt disillusioned by what he considered naive and utopian ideas. When I met him in Berlin, he was earning his money as a waiter for the restaurant and club "Terzo Mondo," a meeting place for leftist intellectuals and emigrants in Berlin.

Our Italian lessons quickly turned into discussions about politics, the history of science, art and theatre. Together with David, the French teacher, and his friend Sylvia, we visited as many exhibitions and theater performances

as we possibly could. Giuseppe was widely read and interested in many different things and always surprised us with his broad range of knowledge. Berlin was a divided city at that time so we obviously also ventured into East Berlin and East Germany. Our group of friends was soon extended to include Bertram and Bertram's later wife Mireille. Together we visited places that are now on every tourist program but at the time amounted to real adventures such as Sanssouci in Potsdam or the Goethe Haus in Weimar. One day in early spring our little group was surprised by a rainstorm

in the gardens of Sanssouci and had to take shelter under a tree for a while. Observing a little snail on a leaf, Giuseppe taught us the tender children's rhyme in his own Milanese dialect that I quoted at the beginning and that I always associate with him and this particular moment:

"Snail, little snail, come out with your little antennas, one for you, one for me, and one for the old lady of Saint Martin."

Pursuing my interests in the history of science, I soon came across the now legendary colloquium on "conceptual history in the natural sciences" led by Peter Damerow and Wolfgang Lefèvre. We both joined the colloquium held at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development which became a turning point in our lives as we found there the kind of history of science that we both loved, based on the study of primary sources but with an eye on the larger philosophical and intellectual questions, including the political and social dimensions of science.

But there were, of course, no professional careers in sight. Soon, however, the institutional situation of the history of science in Berlin improved somewhat when Lorenz Krüger, a former physicist, took up the chair of philosophy of science at the Freie Universität Berlin. I was then able to introduce Giuseppe to Professor Krüger, who was looking for a research assistant to carry out archival work for him. Archival research was Giuseppe's passion and he excelled in it. This encounter, I believe, was the beginning of his return to the profession. Indeed, Lorenz Krüger was very pleased with the work Giuseppe did and Giuseppe had somehow found his own way into the history of science.

The next phase in our collaboration began when the "Arbeitsstelle Albert Einstein"—the Einstein working group—was founded around 1990 at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, led by Peter Damerow and myself. The foundation of this working group was a most unlikely event. I had meanwhile become a collaborator of the Collected Papers of Albert Einstein in Boston and, due to a suggestion by Yehuda Elkana, had the occasion to return to Berlin as a fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg in 1988/89. Through a contact, I tried to convince the newly elected Berlin Senate to provide funds to establish collaboration with the Einstein project in Boston and to foster research on Einstein in Berlin. Initially my efforts seemed rather hopeless but then, some time after my return to Boston, Peter's wife Ingrid discovered a little note in a newspaper announcing that the money had actually been granted. We were now able to implement a research program that would encompass conceptual history, political and cultural history, and archival research, a program in consonance with Giuseppe's and my own intellectual ambitions that would later become instrumental in establishing the new Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.

Together with Tilman Sauer and Werner Heinrich, Giuseppe became a

pivotal figure in the new working group, responsible for archival research and for the institutional and political contexts of Einstein's work in Berlin. He worked not only for the group but also identified new sources for the Collected Papers and thus became an important liaison between the two projects. On the merits of his thorough and exhaustive archival work, his broad knowledge and original ideas, his intellectual and human openness and his wit, Giuseppe soon became a highly respected member of the international family of Einstein scholars. He made important contributions to the understanding of the background of Einstein's call to Berlin, he analyzed Einstein's early relation with astronomers and with the Berlin academy, including the tragic story of Einstein's emigration forced by the Nazis. Perhaps his most important contribution is his joint work with the physicist and historian of science Hubert Goenner, then a member of the advisory board of the Einstein Arbeitsstelle, on Einstein's involvement in the history of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics. Based on Giuseppe's comprehensive archival research, this work led to a paradigmatic study of the role of institutional structures in the early history of quantum physics.

When the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science was founded in 1994, Giuseppe became one of its first scientific collaborators. Much of the research on twentieth-century physics and, in particular, on Einstein done at the institute would have been unthinkable without Giuseppe. In close collaboration with the founding librarian, Urs Schoepflin, and with Peter Damerow he contributed to the fact that the institute not only holds an important library collection but that it has also built up a small but valuable collection of primary sources. Over the years Giuseppe cultivated close relations and friendships with the Einstein community, also by contributing to the volumes of the Collected Papers of Albert Einstein. His work was appreciated by all of its leading editors, from the founding editor John Stachel to the current editor in chief Diana Buchwald, and including Michel Janssen, Christoph Lehner and Robert Schulmann, all of whom became his friends. When in 2005 the institute organized the large Berlin Einstein exhibition "Einstein Chief Engineer of the Universe" Giuseppe became a key figure in developing the concept, assembling and commenting on the relevant documents, as well as writing contributions for the catalogue. The success of the exhibition was to no small degree also his success.

In the midst of all this work and strongly encouraged (and even pushed) by Fabio Bevilacqua and Enrico Giannetto, at the time both professors at the University of Pavia, Giuseppe finally concluded his thesis on the history of biology, which had been shelved for so many years. I still remember vividly that I met him by pure chance on the streets of Pavia, not knowing what he was doing there. He had kept the enterprise a complete secret, insecure as to whether he would actually accomplish it. But now, after he had received his degree, he was justly proud and confident about his future as a historian of science, a fact that filled me with joy.

Undoubtedly the greatest joy in his life was, however, his encounter with Friederike, the extraordinary woman whom he dearly loved and married in June 2004. I was proud to be a witness at their wedding and had never before seen Giuseppe so profoundly happy.

Although Friederike suffered from multiple sclerosis, she and Giuseppe lived very happily and together overcame the difficulties that her illness presented. I remember visiting a liveconcert of Gianluigi Trovesi with them where we all enjoyed Trovesi's sophisticated and somewhat melancholic

music, mixing folklore with jazz. This music will always remind me of Giuseppe. When Friederike died, Giuseppe was inconsolable and lost faith in life almost completely. He once confessed to me that what kept him alive then was the work at the institute that he had imposed upon himself.



Giuseppe and Frederike on their wedding day

For a long time afterwards, Giuseppe was rather reclusive—just like the little snail in his poem—and shied away from meeting up with people. Although he was very lonely he continued to enjoy encounters and conversations with colleagues and friends. We had a few—too few I now regret—conversations over the years, which were all colored by our mutual friendship and affection. Ironically, to my mind, it was only when he was diagnosed cancer that he began to struggle for his life again. He continued to work and never ceased his engagement in the institutional history of quantum physics project. Together with Lindy Divarci, we often discussed publication projects, benefitting from his experience and his professional ethics. One of Giuseppe's last contributions was a concisely written collection of short biographies for a book I authored with Hanoch Gutfreund.

Giuseppe was an inexhaustible source of knowledge and was always happy to offer advice to his colleagues, going to great lengths to provide information whenever it was needed. And he was, so to say, the doyen and often the advisor of the substantial Italian community of scholars at our institute. He was an extraordinary human being whose life has not been easy but who mastered the most difficult challenges he encountered in the bravest manner imaginable.

We all will keep him in our memory with love and respect. Personally, I will remain close to him in our lasting friendship.

Jürgen Renn