

In Memory of Prof. Giovanni B. Agus

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Giovanni Battista Agus was born in mid-December 1943, and passed away on August 31, 2023.

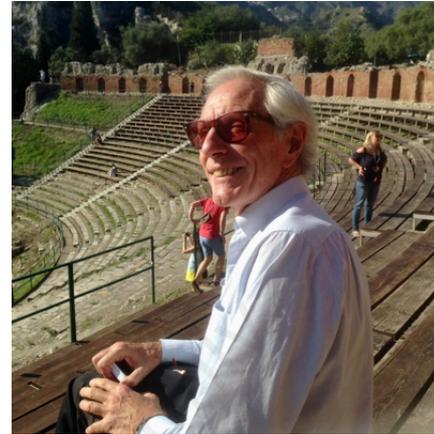
He would soon have turned 80, but he didn't look that way at all, he was so enthusiastic about life, and such was the desire to do more, having had the gift of a very clear mind and a curious spirit, right up to the end.

Yet Giovanni, and few know it, had risked dying as a child, in his hometown of Cagliari, immediately after the war. In fact, at that time he had become seriously ill, and all the doctors who had examined him had failed to find an effective cure, including his father who was a well-known and illustrious doctor.

The young Giovanni also received extreme unction from a friar, a friend of the family, who remained close to him for days, in prayer, even when the child turned unconscious. The spark of life, however, must have already been very tenacious, so much so that Giovanni emerged from that state of illness and no one was ever able to understand how it had been possible, but from that moment Giovanni learned to have Faith and trust, in himself and in others.

I met Giovanni in the autumn of 1982 when, together with other young residents, I was admitted to the School of Vascular Surgery and Angiology of the University of Milan, then directed by Prof. Giorgio Agrifoglio, a student of Edmondo Malan. The School was among the most important ones in Europe, and a true point of reference for Italy, a reference of vascular surgery. The Director was imposing and instilled a certain fear in us specialists, and naturally had imposed his own hierarchy among the Collaborators whom he questioned with criteria, as if each one had a particular preparation in a specific sector.

Among the Seniors I had noticed Giovanni Agus, because it was not difficult to feel a certain curiosity towards him: he had his own "style". Giovanni seemed to have come out of an English col-



A recent picture of Prof. Giovanni Agus visiting the Greek Theatre in Taormina.

lege, it could have been Oxford or Cambridge, elegant, with style, and always ready to give answers or propose technical or clinical solutions, never a word out of place. He was a vascular surgeon, but he could even have been a diplomat, so calm he was in his speech. When he came out of the operating room, even after a couple of arterial procedures, we residents were devastated, but Giovanni Agus was fresh and relaxed, and available to explain the surgical technique and inform about the prosthetic material used; total availability. Forty years later Giovanni was still like this.

As was quite usual in those times in all graduate schools, hierarchies were enforced with unwritten rules, and one had to learn them quickly in order to learn, and above all to be permitted to do. Giovanni Agus was among those people who did not impose rules and did not point out hierarchies, working with him was a pleasure. Just as it was a pleasure to ask him questions, because the answer was always complete, exhaustive, a real lesson often accompanied with bibliographical notes and even advice on reading a specific chapter of a book, or an article in a magazine to go and retrieve later in the library. If time or occasion permitted, he added references to the history of medicine. Giovanni Agus was certainly a cultured person, he evidently read a lot and probably slept little, but he was certainly always "very keen", it was difficult to find him unprepared for something.

If his relationship with the residents was very good, that with the nurses was idyllic, demonstrating a modern aspect of collaboration in the department. Probably the best aspect that Giovanni knew how to apply was the "Humanization of Medicine", and this was aimed at anyone, colleagues or patients, and obviously the staff on duty.

Giovanni Agus's professional career is known to most of us, I believe, as a Head Professor between the Universities of Milan and Pavia, with four specializations: Angiology, Vascular Surgery, General Surgery and Cardiac Angiosurgery. He could also have been specialized in History of Medicine because his knowledge

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was truly encyclopedic in this field.¹⁻² At home, he had such a vast library that had requested an apartment dedicated only to books and magazines. Moreover, Giovanni was always ready to provide notions or anecdotes of the History of Medicine, and he had a series of historical reproductions to be envied; a cultured man, wise but not pedantic, even if it was impossible to stand up to him.

I traveled with him to many Conferences, preparing our speeches, slides and tables together. English was not his strong point, especially in pronunciation, and so we repeated his speech endlessly until he was satisfied. The various interventions in London and Paris were memorable, where usually the Institute of Vascular Surgery presented numerous works. In the evening, once the presentations were over, the classic “round of beers” was a real pleasure. With Giovanni I participated in numerous conferences, and I struggle to remember them all, even if Kyoto and Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro or New York, just to name a few that are completely opposite to each other, seemed to him to be the most common places in the world. In all cases, he was always informed or prepared to go and visit or learn. He always had with him a folder with newspaper clippings or programs of events not to be missed, truly eclectic considering that all these activities took place after a day of congress.

I remember with pleasure the year in which we both presented a work in Bremen because, in this case too, Giovanni had already thought of combining business with pleasure. In fact, he was already happy with our presentations, but wanted to celebrate by taking a guided tour of the Becks brewery with lots of tastings. In contrast, the following evening he took me to hear an organ concert in the Bremen Cathedral and Giovanni not only had the program, but also some musical scores.

Once the Congress was over, we extended the stop by a day because Giovanni wanted to go to visit Lübeck. During the train journey Giovanni, who had naturally prepared himself to visit the Town Hall, Thomas Mann’s house and above all the *Santo Spirito Hospital*, was a volcano of happiness. The arrival by train unfortunately coincided with a very strong rainstorm and so, soaking wet, we managed to find an entrance to the Town Hall, without paying too much attention to which way we had entered. So it happened that, opening one door among the many present in a deserted hall, we were welcomed by a very elegant man almost two meters tall. We were still wet from the storm, but we introduced ourselves, in English, explaining who we were and where we came from, and why we were there for: the frescoes. To make it short, the giant was the Mayor of Lübeck, and spoke an excellent Italian, having even played basketball for the then *Simmenthal Team of Milano*, and retained a splendid memory of our City. He acted as a guide and took us to visit not only the frescoes that Giovanni had in his notebook, but also the rest of the Palace. Furthermore, there was a private event dedicated to the architect *Le Corbusier*, and we soon found ourselves with a plate of salmon canapés in one hand and a glass of fresh Riesling in the other. Considering it was around 10 AM, the day was off to a good start.

The *Hospital of Santo Spirito*, an ancient medieval hospice built between 1227 and 1286, was one of the oldest social institutions in Europe (in 1400’s a similar thing was done in Beaune,

Burgundy, with the Hotel-Dieu). Of course, Giovanni’s culture helped me visit the magnificent Hanseatic City as if I had a personal guide, a privilege.

Giovanni was famous for these post-congress evening “escapades”: in Rio de Janeiro, he managed to organize with a small group of friends, as many as two taxis could transport, to go and listen to music in clubs that were located in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods of the city. The evening went very well, with excellent music and lots of pats and handshakes with unknown but smiling and kind people.

It was no mystery that Giovanni Agus loved the mountains, and above all going to climb them, he went looking for them almost everywhere, even in difficult conditions. Few know that Giovanni had many friends among the Alpine Guides, and among these also Ferdinando Rollando, who had been the protagonist of a project, known as “Alpistan”, created by the Aga Khan, with the aim of teaching Afghans to become guides, but above all ski instructors, on the beautiful snowy mountains of Afghanistan, which was already the scene of wars at that time.

Giovanni was in epistolary contact with this friend of his, and every week he received news on the situation, and then shared comments and answers with me. This exchange of e-mails went on for many months, until Rollando returned to Italy, perhaps also because he had escaped a couple of attacks around Kabul.

This was when Giovanni managed to reach an agreement with Rollando, who in the meantime had started working as a guide in Italy again, for a climb on the Mont Blanc. At the time, Giovanni was very trained, he got up every morning to go running when many were still in bed sleeping. He took part in races, half marathons and so on, because he always wanted to be ready.

Fate decided that the trip to the Mont Blanc coincided with the birth of his first grandson, and so Giovanni was forced to give it up. Moreover, the fate was double because a terrible snowstorm surprised the Guide Rollando and a young man who was with him, and they both disappeared, never to be found again. Like he once had managed to survive as a child, again Giovanni was saved from death, this time thanks to a child.

The anecdotes about the life, work and travels linked to Giovanni Agus are so many that it would be impossible to remember them all.

It is important to remember that, for luck or skill, Giovanni never lost a patient in the operating theatre, and above all he remembered every single person by name even years later.

It’s impossible to replace a man like this, a great but also very complex person.

Personally, I simply want to remember him as a great, irreplaceable friend that I will miss, leaving a big void for many.

References

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