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Happy birthday Rita Levi Montalcini

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One hundred and three candles on the birthday cake for **Rita Levi Montalcini**, a Nobel Prize winner for medicine and most noble figure in Italian science.

President **Giorgio Napolitano** has expressed his best wishes for her birthday. Other Italian politicians, such as Renato Schifani, Anna Finocchiaro, Gianfranco Fini, Vannino Chiti, Gianni Alemanno and Nicola Zingaretti have also wished her a happy birthday. Even the Web is celebrating the Italian Nobel Prize winner. In Italy, her name is among the trending topics on Twitter, and on the Facebook page dedicated to her, there are a multitude of users' greetings.

With her, we celebrate a whole century in the life of the country, of which she represents excellence, as invoked as it is neglected, or even persecuted. Passion and intelligence, balance and strictness, the adventure of knowledge, a conscious optimism, and enlightened exercise, open to reason; these are the keys to interpreting her extremely long life, which has been dedicated to research, apparently detached, far from the typical concerns of the majority, but in fact, dedicated to the good of those who are suffering, and to the good of scientific development.

The latest books

"Elogio dell'imperfezione" ("A eulogy to imperfection") is her latest autobiographical work. Her biography *"Cronologia di una scoperta"* ("Chronology of a discovery") was published by Baldini, Castoldi and Dalai three years ago, to coincide with her one hundredth birthday. In the last few years, Rita Levi-Montalcini has also distinguished herself, with a series of books of an autobiographical and popular nature, such as *"Cantico di una vita"* ("Song of a life") and *"Abbi il coraggio di conoscere"* ("Have the courage to learn"), a title that recalls the famous "Sapere aude" by Immanuel Kant, the best Prussian thinker on human reason.

Her commitment in schools

Even today, the indestructible teacher has the energy to visit schools and universities, meeting those young people in whom she puts her trust for the future of science. In a world of gloomy pessimists, she is, in some way, a rare beast, a witness of that scientific optimism that characterised the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth centuries. This did not prevent her from wondering about key questions of our day, or from grasping topics concerning the environment and sustainable development, concepts that were unknown or almost unknown during her youth. Not bad at all for a girl who, initially, had little faith in herself. The facts had proved her right, and indeed, have made her a point of reference.

Her life

The life senator (which she has been since 2001, on the recommendation of the President of the Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi) **was born on 22 April 1909**, in Turin, with her twin sister

Paola, who died 9 years ago, her mother Adele and father Adamo, an engineer and businessman. Growing up in a good, middle-class family, with a non-religious upbringing, the young Rita studied medicine at Turin University, with the luminary Joseph Levi (the father of the writer Natalia Ginzburg), and acquired a passion for studying the exceptionally complex nervous system, a study that she would never abandon, that would lead her to obtain the most important results, and achieve great notoriety. As a Sephardic Jewess, she fled to Belgium after the Fascist racial laws of 1938, only to return to Italy, two years later, when that country was swept by Hitler's Wehrmacht.

After escaping the murderous fury of the Nazis by hiding in Florence, Rita Montalcini emigrated, to work in the USA, where she remained for thirty years, from **1947 to 1977**, at the Department of Zoology of Washington University in Missouri.

Scientific discoveries

It was at the Department of Zoology of Washington University in Missouri that, in **1951-52**, she made her most famous discovery, that of the nerve growth factor (NGF), which regulates the development of the nervous systems. With the studies that followed (especially in 1971, of the exact determination of the protein structure of the NGF, which was shared with Ruth Hogue Angeletti), the discovery finally earned Montalcini and her American colleague Stanley Cohen the Nobel Prize for Medicine, in 1986.

Return to Italy

In addition to her long stay in America, which provided the researcher with resources and freedoms that would have been unthinkable in the Italy of limited funding, from 1961 to 1979, Montalcini worked in Italy, with the National Research Council, first at the Neurobiology Research Centre, and then in the Biology Laboratory; even after her (theoretical) retirement, for reasons of age, she continued, until 1995, to collaborate as a guest professor, and later as a "super-expert", deepening her studies into the nerve growth factor and identifying new surprising biological functions. She has received countless Italian and international acknowledgements from the most prestigious organisations, including four honorary degrees.

Her foundation

Montalcini writes on **the home page of her Foundation**: "I have dedicated my life to research and to social issues. Life has value if we don't focus only on ourselves, but also on the world around us.

"I came to this decision as a result of the need to tackle one of the most important issues affecting the peoples of Africa, namely, the lack of access to education for almost all women."

Politics

During the years of the Prodi government, Rita Levi-Montalcini played a political role, almost despite herself. All of a sudden, the majority, which was on a knife's edge, often depended on the handful of life senators. She never failed to be there, in the chamber, at the decisive moments, and even had to suffer undeserved ridicule by a member of the minority, who made fun of her age, and suggested she get crutches. Her response, during a marathon night-time session in the Senate, was memorable. "Will Storace be able to keep going till late? If not, I can always lend him one of my crutches."

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