

Rosario Brancato 25 August 1934; 8 February 2020

Two comments in particular seem to have occurred automatically to several of my colleagues over the last few hours: “It’s the end of an era” and, “We’ve lost a giant in his field”.

I think they both perfectly encapsulate a feeling shared by many: Professor Brancato was indeed a giant towering over a period of 50 years in the history of Ophthalmology. I know Lady Luck smiled on me when I became one of his gang.

It was November 1980 and I was making my way to the Trieste Eye Clinic to meet him for the first time. I had to decide where to apply to do my residency program. I had various options, but after talking to him for a few minutes I was hooked.

His vitality knew no bounds and his unrestrained enthusiasm was infectious. That was the first thing that struck you about the professor: the way he always found things exciting and his ability to transmit his enthusiasm to those around him. If you were next to him you felt duty bound to give it your all.

I was in a trance when I stepped out of the office and I immediately phoned my father to tell him that all my doubts and misgivings had dissolved: Trieste had shot to the top of my list of options.

Two years later, after tearing a strip off a permanent member of staff who was instructing me, he told me tetchily to follow him into his office. I was terrified. Once inside, he carefully closed the door, beamed at me and, looking me straight in the eye with that gaze that could bore a hole in you, he uttered one of the most gratifying things anyone has ever said to me: “Do you want to come to Milan with me? Talk it over at home before giving me your answer”. It took a little effort to convince him that I had already decided on the spot and a few months later we were at the San Raffaele

(together with Menchini, Carnevalini, Pece and Scialdone), embarking on an adventure that ought to have a chapter to itself in a manual on company management. Don Luigi's genius was a perfect match for the prof's skills as an organizer and in just a few years they were able to turn an outpatient service in the basement of Sector A into a showpiece ophthalmology department: neatly divided into sub-units, each with its own head and a staff turnover that grew as his fame and international standing increased.

In addition to his infectious enthusiasm and talents as an organizer, something else that made Professor Brancato stand out was his penchant for innovation. He was always keen on exploring new machines and experimental techniques and his own professional history bears this out: he was one of the first to use fluoroangiography and lasers, he was an early enthusiast of intraocular lenses and refractive surgery and for him OCT was a great new toy. This passion for novelty was often a source of discord with more solemn colleagues, who were scandalized by these sudden leaps in the dark. But rather than putting him off, this friction spurred him on all the more.

Going with him to the pavilions of the American Academy meant joining a wild chase for the latest thing, which would then have to be sent to our clinic before any other hospital department in Italy got wind of it. It was his ambition to create the best possible clinic and he went about it with such energy that the clinic was soon churning out young doctors equipped with all the latest skills, so that in no time they became unchallenged authorities for patients and colleagues alike. Dozens upon dozens of ophthalmologists were trained over the years in this way and thanks to an organizational "instinct" that was ahead of its time, they obtained a firm grounding and have since become experts in their chosen field. The model has now been taken up by many other hospitals, but in the 1980s it amounted to a revolution in the way things were done. Out of the window went standard procedures based on the figure of the "right-hand man" – the expert one could always turn to for help, in whom one had

complete faith (for us this was Menchini for many years). But gradually we all became “right-hand men” and from that moment the way the clinic operated changed.

The prof was one of the first to understand the importance of publishing well and although he belonged to a generation that was not familiar with impact factor and citation index, he realized that publishing for publishing’s sake was a dead end and he urged us to publish in the leading journals and to make sure our work was up to standard. It was at that time that he founded the European Journal of Ophthalmology, which thanks to him has been indexed in all the major data banks, the first and to date only Italian example in ophthalmological literature.

Attending the ARVO Congress was an opportunity for the San Raffaele to show off how the hospital could operate to the highest standards in all aspects of ophthalmology. The bar was set by the large departments in US hospitals, but we can proudly claim that in some years we overtook them in terms of the number of contributions. Indeed, Professor Brancato was characteristically quick to appreciate the need to attend congresses abroad. And the respect he gained in foreign circles was soon translated into greater credibility in Italy. He joined the Jules Gonin Club, the Macula Society, the Retina Society and the International Academy of Ophthalmology and was awarded the highest tributes from these international organizations. His English never became fluent, it’s true, but when it was his turn to present a paper, there was always a respectful hush in the auditorium. He himself organized important international scientific events, which were held in Italy precisely thanks to his renown and his professional credibility, as well as, it’s only fair to recall, the organizational aptitude of Laura, who contributed a great deal to his success.

He is among those who have given most to Italian ophthalmology through their dedication and passion. His partnership with Professor Coscas and Professor Lumbroso saw him involved in dozens of teaching programmes that helped train new generations of ophthalmologists. The spinoffs from his work were obviously important for all of us who were working in his shadow, but in point of fact Italian ophthalmology as

a whole was taken more seriously in the world thanks to his commitment. I remember seeing him on his return from a congress in the Far East, when he spent a few hours in the clinic rearranging slides in their holders so he could take them to the States for another congress. It's no exaggeration to say that he lived for his work. His effort and his work were two essential ingredients in his success and he definitely thought very highly of both. In any case, all of us (from Menchini down) arrived at the clinic thanks to these two factors. We were grateful to him for these priorities when it came to choosing his colleagues, because otherwise we would have been stuck with no arrows in our quiver when facing the competition. We were always secure in the knowledge that if the Prof. felt you were "one of the gang", he would move heaven and earth for you!

I've often wondered what the Prof. would have done in various situations I found myself in over the past few years. When he was at work he seemed to act on instinct, and he certainly wasn't short of a certain kind of cunning and plain intuition. At first acquaintance he might seem impulsive, but in fact he was quite ready to review his choices carefully and rationally, until he reached a conclusion he was happy with, and it was always the right one. Although a southerner born and bred, he also absorbed traits from Tuscany, Trieste and Milan during his peregrinations. A few years ago he overcame his natural reserve and told me he was grateful to Milan, a city where he definitely ended up feeling at home.

The man we've lost truly was a giant who left his unmistakable mark across fifty years of Ophthalmology. He will be sorely missed. But the great masters do have one undoubted advantage: they live on in their pupils and in a sense get a second wind, their influence founding schools where their philosophy inspires the new generations. There are many of us who have borrowed from him our everyday procedures, unconsciously emulating his way of doing things (as he used to say). I'm sure that if he could, he would smile one of his knowing smiles and fire a typical adage: "Keep your powder dry, Francesco. The best horse is one that stays the course!". It's up to us

at the school he built to prove he chose his horses well and that the school will continue to flourish just as he envisaged it.

A affectionate hug to all his family and to all those who were fond of him.

Francesco Bandello