EMILIO VERATTI AND THE RING OF THE CZARINA

ABSTRACT. — Camillo Golgi, recipient of the Nobel award for Medicine or Physiology in 1906, trained many students destined to acquire international fame in the biological and medical sciences. Emilio Veratti, who was for many years Golgi’s right arm in the laboratory, did not seem to be able to perform scientifically as well as many of his co-disciples. He was noted for his witty and proud character, as well as for his intellectual cleverness and skill with histological techniques. Yet his scientific productivity and academic career suffered from his excessive self-critical attitude and the division of his research interests among too many fields. Through a series of coincidences, he eventually came to occupy Golgi’s chair at 58 years of age, twelve years after Golgi’s retirement. International recognition of his research work occurred much later, in the 1950s and 1960s, when those who investigated the fine structure and functional significance of the sarcoplasmic reticulum of muscle fibers rediscovered a splendid paper that he had published more than fifty years previously. This study, based on a modification by Veratti of Golgi’s black reaction, was judged by international experts to be by far the best contribution of light microscopy to the understanding of the structure of the sarcoplasmic reticulum. The octogenarian Veratti reacted to these belated and unexpected celebrations of his work with typical modesty, self-effacement and even skepticism.

Key words: Veratti; Golgi; Sarcoplasmic reticulum; Epistemology of the Golgi school.

Since I am neither an expert of muscle physiology nor a historian of science, I feel that I must explicate my reasons for accepting Professor Margreth’s kind invitation to speak at this Golgi day at the Accademia dei Lincei, celebrating the centennial of the publication of Emilio Veratti’s paper on the sarcoplasmic reticulum. Nearly fifty years ago I enrolled in the Medical School of the University of Pavia, at a time when legend still surrounded the scientific adventure that had brought the Nobel prize in Medicine to Camillo Golgi and had made the names of several of his coworkers appear as eponyms of important discoveries in treatises of biology and medicine.
At that time Antonio Pensa and Emilio Veratti, two direct coworkers of Golgi, were still alive, both about 80 years of age (fig. 1). I don’t remember ever seeing Veratti, who after leaving his position of Professor of General Pathology had retired to his native house in Varese, where he died in 1967 at 95 years of age. In contrast, Pensa was very much around (he died at 96 in 1970), since he had kept an official National Research Council position in the Institute of Human Anatomy that he had previously directed for several years. I knew him well (he gave me the whole Histology examination and part of the Anatomy examination), and during the six years of my undergraduate work at the Anatomy Institute I had frequent contacts with him. His recollections of times past made me develop almost an anthropologist’s curiosity for the human factor behind a scientific effort that had restored to my alma mater the international prestige it had enjoyed in the 18th century, when it boasted among its professors two extraordinary geniuses such as Alessandro Volta and Lazzaro Spallanzani. The name of Emilio Veratti was known to my fellow students and myself mostly because he was the author of two textbooks that we had to study for our examinations of Microbiology and General Pathology. Yet there were interesting stories about him as a very unusual man whose academic career had not been equal to his remarkable intellect. The impact of his