

Francesco Dondi

(1943 – 2015)



Sometimes he pronounced himself a “country boy” and in some ways he was right; he was down-to-earth, closely observing nature and the scientific “weather”; he was imaginative, resolute and decisive, hard-working – and sometimes a bit stubborn. Francesco is still on the minds of many of us, despite departing more than half a year ago. But sometimes it takes a while until one realizes the true impact of such a loss of a close friend and extraordinary science companion. Francesco was actually the initiator of this special issue on Science, Responsibility and Governance, so it is appropriate to remember him here – and there are many more reasons.

Francesco was born in the Northern Italian countryside in the small city of Sermide at the Po-River in August 1943, a time of chaos and horror; especially in April 1945, when the war zone moved across the Po River passing Sermide with its important bridge, to finally come to an end in the plains north of the river. Francesco sometimes recalled, with slight shudder, the sighting of the remains of military hardware in the Po River surfacing when the water was low. A few years later (1951), the region was again devastated by a flood of the Po River, sending half a million refugees across the countryside. Such early childhood impressions may have had a strong impact on his personality, on his high regard for stability, orderliness and discipline, which were, by some, perceived as rigidity. But most who knew him will closely attest to his great hospitality, reliability and trustworthiness.

He had great affection to his home country, the lower Po River plain close to the Adriatic, and he liked to live in it. Federico Fellini’s “Amarcord” was his favorite movie, indicative of his love – and sorrow – for his country. Not that he was parochial; he was open-minded and interested in the views and cultures of others. He read the poems of Mandelstam in Italian and Russian, had great interest

in Eastern philosophy, and met and paid tribute to many colleagues from all over the world. But home for Francesco was always the lower Po River plain, his house in Sermide inherited from his parents; and, during the many years of academic tenure at the University of Ferrara (1969–2013), his apartment on the Piazza Ariostea. In his view, the culinary center of the universe was just a few steps away from his apartment, and the best ice cream was (and still is) made in the ice cream parlor just outside across the Piazza. Francesco was an excellent cook, and when he really wanted to relax, his favorite reading was the monthly “La Cucina Italiana”. He was a great lover of paintings, collecting the art of the local painter Ottavio Barozzi, and was an enthusiast for classical music, especially operatic productions with Barbara Hendricks. And Verdi; attending the opera Aida in the Arena of Verona was an unforgettable experience! Not so much because of the opera itself, but for being there with Francesco, listening to his stories of the past, to his explanations what these performances meant to the people of the Northern banks of the Po Valley; visits to Verona with him were special, also for him – there he had some of his closest friends. He knew his country well, so it was equally enjoyable and informative to listen to his explanations of the architectural beauty of the buildings surrounding the Piazza Navona in Rome. Francesco was reminiscent of a renaissance man, well-versed in many aspects of European culture, history and philosophy, a man more of the sober Lombardian sort rather than Tuscan.

Francesco’s academic interests and research activities were mainly in three areas: the theory and application of separation methods including chromatography and field-flow fractionation, environmental protection problems, and teaching on the application of ethical principles in chemistry. Studies on field-flow fractionation and on stochastic methods in chromatography and environmental analysis were Francesco’s most-notable contributions, together with his co-workers Chiara Pietrogrande, Luisa Pasti, Alberto Cavazzini, and Attila Felinger, which were laid down in about 150 publications. He held great esteem for the works of the late Calvin Giddings (one joint publication) and the late George Guiochon, the latter at that time physicochemistry professor at the “Ecole Normale Supérieure” (before he emigrated to the USA to become professor at the University of Tennessee), with whom he spent a year of research in Paris, resulting in four joint publications.

In the last decade before his retirement (2014), Francesco became strongly involved in advancing the role of universities in teaching ethical principles to chemistry students, and attempts to extend such thinking to science in general. This challenge occupied him so much because he was, in principle, a humanitarian thinker, trying to understand the role of chemistry and the extent how far chemists/scientists are responsible to society in the spirit of Hans Jonas’ “Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age”. In this sense, Francesco initiated and contributed to a number of conferences devoted to “Ethics and Science for the Environment” (<http://www.cheesefondue-workshops.uni-bayreuth.de/CFW09/fora.html>) at Bayreuth (Jan 2007, organized by H. Frank), Ferrara (Sep 2007) – at which Nobel Laureate Richard Ernst contributed the two papers contained herein – Torun (Oct 2008, organized by B. Buszewski), Modena (April 2011), and Porto (May 2012, organized by J. Machado). As a result and continuation of these, special symposia on “Ethics in Chemistry” were held during the Chemical Congresses of the European Association for the Chemical and Molecular Sciences (EuCheMS) in Nürnberg (Aug/Sep 2010) and Prague (Aug 2012), leading to the establishment of the EuCheMS Working Party “Ethics in Chemistry” (<http://www.euchems.eu/divisions/ethics-in-chemistry/>). At the same time, in the principle of “Think globally, act locally”, Francesco untiringly promoted the issue also in his immediate neighborhood, initiating the Forum on “Scienza, Responsabilità, e Governo” organized by Giancarlo Naldi on 12 June 2013 at the “Accademia delle Scienze” in Bologna, of which most of the contributions contained in this special issue originated. It also contains his last contributions with his student Frank Moser. Francesco’s Legacy.