Carmine Melino: a Universe by his own

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My first meeting, my first impact, with professor Carmine Melino was a sensation of dealing with a difficult person, introverted, one who does not admit the right to reply. But later on, once I met him better, he slowly became a Master of Life, a Master for my future working and professional life. Not only for me, but also for many boys of my age, in the 70’. Yes, we are discussing of 50 years ago! I have to thank professor Carmine Melino not only for the teaching at the professional level, but even more for the guidance and mentoring on my own life. He was a fountain of knowledge, where everybody could, at their will, go to take, learn, discuss, “drink”: a word for everybody, even though with that profound voice he required respect, and represented, in both the railways and university hierarchy, authority if not even fear.

I met him in January 1972, as soon as I moved to Rome, with him still Chief Inspector at that time, moments before becoming Chief Superior Inspector, when the previous chief, Dr Massaro, retired. I worked with him until his retirement in 1976, when he left the Health Service of the Italian State Railways at the level of General Director. He moved, indeed, to the University teaching and scientific research. It was a traumatic experience for me, a young boy of 21, as he was not only a high level hierarch of the Railways, but also a complex structured university professor teaching at the Faculty of Biology in the University of L’Aquila, as well as at the School of Specialization in Industrial Medicine at the “Sapienza” University of Rome, at that time directed by professor Granati.

Nonetheless, a friendship was born, that resulted in having me hosted in his house, meeting his wife and children, of my own age, and meeting his relatives in Naples: absolutely no formalities from his side. Actually I think he liked my like his own son. And from my own side, I responded with respect, availability, work ethics, trust. Thanks to him the health service within the State Railways opened up a new course.

What was then a regular routine, thanks to his double role at Railways and at University, became a new activity, with a unique impulse of activities that had no peer in the Central Office IV, the Office for Railways Hygiene and Health. It affected the National Health System itself! As an example, our office

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engaged the Health Emergency in Naples during the Cholera Epidemic. At the local Railways Health Inspectorate, then directed by Dr. Calcarca, we started mass vaccinations, not only of Rail workers, but also of their families and of all passengers who requested, long before this service was also offered by the Health Authorities of the Town of Naples. Furthermore, we also extended the service by disinfecting and controlling the drinking water in all stations of the Province of Naples. In fact at that time all Railways stations, worker’s houses, deposits of engines and trains, industrial sites in whole Italy were supplied from deep water wells, whose chemo-physical and microbiological properties were routinely controlled by 18 peripheral Health Departmental Offices, all part of the Central Office IV, the Office for Railways Hygiene and Health, directed by professor Melino.

However the dream of Prof. Carmine Melino was the create, within the State Railway, a special Research Structure for chemical, physical and biological investigations, like at the University. A research structure that should have become the diamond flagship for research in environmental carcinogenesis and work-related diseases, specialized in problems and environment dealing with paints, welds, galvanic processing, and all work involving exposure to toxic agents, such as asbestos or other specific toxicities. In reality the State Railways already had a special research structure specialized in the evaluation, control and assessment of road material in use at railways: the Experimental Institute of Trastevere in Rome. However, the Experimental Institute of Trastevere only rarely, and always with significant delays, was performing investigations in the field of Occupational Medicine, the area that later on was to be redefined as Industrial Medicine. Those times were the early golden times defining the field of Industrial Hygiene. Exciting times at the fundamental crossing from quantification of the risk to the obligation of protection of the individual worker in each specific work environment. At that time, it was common to pay more the worker, but both the employer and worker knew of the risks involved in activities like painting, stripping, welding, disassembling, reassembling of apparatuses contaminated by powders of toxic nature originated by the usage of the machine and materials.

Professor Carmine Melino established in less than two years the first Laboratory of Industrial Hygiene of the State Railways, unthinkable for a bureaucracy structure of the State in 1970, and possibly even today. With his uncontrolled will and unlimited determination he created sections of phonometry, gas-chromatography, atomic absorption spectrophotometry, microscopy, bromathology and so on. He created the framework for a highly competitive Research Institute, including an Animal House that was completed in 1980 when he was already retired. This operation was completed by his successors as Heads of the Central Office IV in the Office for Railways Hygiene and Health, Prof. Salvatore Principe and Dr. Aldo Serio. The Research Institute was completed next the Ostiense Railway Station of Rome, and named “Centre for Preventive Medicine Pigafetta”.

This is still active today, even though it does not belong anymore to the State Railways, but it has been transformed into a Health Medical Centre affiliated with the Italian National Health Service. In fact, the new State Act, the 833/1978 law creating the Italian National Health Service, with its subsequent legislation, induced the State Railways, and the new derived Railways Enterprise to change the health strategy and the Railway Medical Service. The 1970-1980 were incredible years with exponential growth of the Health Service of the State Railways. We participated in scientific meetings, we wrote numerous scientific publications in Hygiene, Industrial
Medicine, Cancerogenesis, collaborating with several other research Institutes at the Sapienza University, with Prof. S.U. D’Arca, at the Catholic University, with Prof. Castellino, at the National Institute of Health (ISS) as well as other Italian Universities interested in Industrial Medicine.

In those years the Section of “Industrial Medicine of Latium” was created. And, with the impulse of Prof. Carmine Melino, we created the “College of Railways Medical Doctors”, including doctors from wards, those dedicated to railways health controls, Industrial doctors, doctors specialized in Industrial Hygiene, doctors of the National Health Service within Large Repair Centres, maintenance teams where monitoring and repair of all small, medium, large rail vehicles occurred. In these centres it became compulsory the presence of an Industrial Hygiene Doctor to check and regularly monitor the health and psycho-physical status of workers, dedicated to distinct environmental conditions due for example to monitor and selectively repair cars, engines and road material. In those years the State Railway started a 10-years process to create more modern and efficient structures with an increasing attention to the work environment, including external monitoring of emissions, indoors, wastes, industrial waters. More and more complex work procedures require very specific handling of potentially toxic agents and need depuration treatments of air and water.

The impulse and stimuli continuously coming from Professor Carmine Melino did transform a sector not only with immediate temporary effects, but also for the many years to come. It was the new start of paradigm shift in how to work and how to think Health prevention in the Railways world. A small demonstration of this new concepts can be traced in the numerous scientific papers published in many national and international scientific journals, including Annals of Hygiene, Annals of the National Institutes of Health just to mention a few. But here the space is limited and I have to limit the discussion. Professor Carmine Melino was a lighthouse for the State Railways in the 1970s. Others are more expert and able to illustrate his incredible intuitions, dedication, professionalism, intelligence, hard working and ability to create in difficult contexts, with all the limitation of the times, things that we would define as “dreams with open eyes”!

This was Professor Carmine Melino, so loved by all who met and worked with him. But there is also a Melino at human level, as mentioned above. He who invites you at home, pushes you to improve beyond your own limits, meeting new gods, new dreams. He who is happy to teach you everything, both simple daily tricks or complex intellectual goals. One thought that possibly no one knows, even not his children Gerry and Gabriellina: Melino, the man who, talking about his own youth, said: “If you were to get married, choose a woman with BRIX (happiness), an achronym which in Italian sound as “Bella” + “Ricca” + “Intelligente” + “Onesta” (in Englis: “Beautiful” + “Riche” + “Intelligent” + “Honest”) … and then “… honesty so that she could give you joy, respect, love and respect from your own children”, exactly what he himself did with the only unique great love of his own life, his beloved and always remembered with regret and nostalgia, Maria Frascino.