

Renzo Leonardi and ECT*

“This Institute started because of the vision of a man, Renzo Leonardi, whom we have to thank for his remarkable achievement. Renzo’s character is to push a lot to get his ideas realized, even, as was the case with ECT, within a local community that did not know anything about theoretical nuclear physicists...”*

*Gianluca Salvatori,
Former Minister of Science of the Trentino Province
on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of ECT*,
Trento, September 2008*

Professor Renzo Leonardi passed away on 6 July 2019, and was one of the "fathers" of Physics in Trento and of the University's Department of Povo, as well as of the European Centre for Theoretical Nuclear Physics in Villa Tambosi, Villazzano (Trento) and of the Proton Therapy Centre in Trento.

The idea of founding a European Centre for Theoretical Nuclear Physics began to take shape around 1990. In the United States the Institute of Nuclear Theory (INT) in Seattle was already active and successful. It was considered desirable to establish a European counterpart of such an institution that could coherently promote nuclear theory activities in Europe and foster the exchange between theory and experiment in the broad field of nuclear physics and its related areas.

Ben Mottelson and Aage Winther took the initiative in formulation of a plan for such a European centre at the Niels Bohr Institute (NBI) in Copenhagen. Early in 1991 a committee, chaired by Oriol Bohigas, was appointed in order to explore the situation and collect proposals. Further to the already existing NBI proposal, plans were prepared in the Netherlands (Groningen) and in Italy, as well as at CERN. As a consequence of difficulties in securing national support, the Copenhagen and Groningen proposals were withdrawn in mid 1992, and so was the CERN proposal. The focus was now on Italy and was first directed toward Legnaro. But by that time Renzo Leonardi and David Brink (who was soon to become a faculty member at the University of Trento) had already a well prepared plan to create the Centre at Trento. With his strong and deeply rooted ties to his beloved Trentino region and the beautiful city of Trento, Renzo had the vision to initiate what was to become the first truly international institution of this autonomous province in the center of Europe.

In October 1992 a memorable meeting was held in Orsay to discuss the report of the Bohigas committee. A group of nuclear theorists from all over Europe gathered to discuss perspectives and the Italian proposals. The emerging decision in favor of Trento was based on the infrastructure and expertise in theoretical physics that already existed at the University and— very importantly— on the strong support offered by the Province through the Istituto Trentino di Cultura (ITC). It is impossible to imagine how much time and effort Renzo had spent convincing Trentino representatives to the point at which this was all worked out and agreed upon. It was obvious that he identified himself with this project to the depth of his heart.

The decisions taken at the Orsay meeting included the nomination of the first Board of Directors, the main organ of the Center, representing the community of physicists who support its scientific activities. This Board nominated Ben Mottelson as founding director and David Brink as vice-director, while Renzo Leonardi was given the charge of Scientific Secretary, a position that he would hold for the next 15 years while continuing his research and teaching activities at the University. Renzo's initial work was essential in helping the Board draft the Statutes of the Centre, a document that established its relationship with ITC. This document prepared further negotiation with the European Science Foundation, and led to agreement where the ESF is closely associated with ECT* through NuPECC. These Statutes stayed basically unchanged until recently when the organizational framework of the Trentino's scientific institutions was restructured and embedded into the Fondazione Bruno Kessler.

The Inaugural Symposium of ECT* was held in September 1993. Earlier that year, Renzo himself had travelled to the EU administration in Brussels and presented the application for financial support in person—an important and successful step in shaping the financial frame for the Centre. Renzo's communications with the administration in Brussels were of great help also in subsequent years, for example in getting the Center recognized as a "Major European Research Infrastructure," or in the initiation of ECT*'s Doctoral Training Programme, which has become one of the core activities of the Center. Locally, Renzo has been constantly looking for ways to improve the position of the Center within its environment, emphasizing the importance of the "related areas," and taking initiatives to develop advanced scientific computing at ECT*. Last but not least, Renzo found a superb residence, with a fantastic view of the Trento valley, which all the successive directors of the Center have enjoyed.

A lasting monument of Renzo's vision for the ECT* is undoubtedly the unmatched beauty of the Villa Tambosi. When the Centre started in 1993, its activities were first confined within the so-called Rustico, a smaller adjacent building. The Villa itself had to undergo massive restoration work prior to its revival as the architectural marvel that represents ECT* ever since. Renzo guided and guarded this restoration in all details and with his full devotion. Its magnificent interiors, recovered wall paintings, and aesthetic balance have made Villa Tambosi the worldwide renowned symbol of ECT*. Renzo, the expert and lover of the arts, has left here his distinct signature. A conference room in the Rustico has been dedicated to him, called "Aula Renzo Leonardi". Moreover, in front of one of the frescoed rooms in the Villa a plaque remembers the efforts of Renzo Leonardi as initiator of the restoration of the Villa at the end of the last century.

Many physicists, visitors, postdocs, and students have enjoyed the hospitality and creative atmosphere at ECT* over the years and will continue doing so for many years to come; and all will join us in a worldwide chorus of gratitude to Renzo Leonardi for his essential role in establishing the ECT*.