

Surgeons of the Genoese School

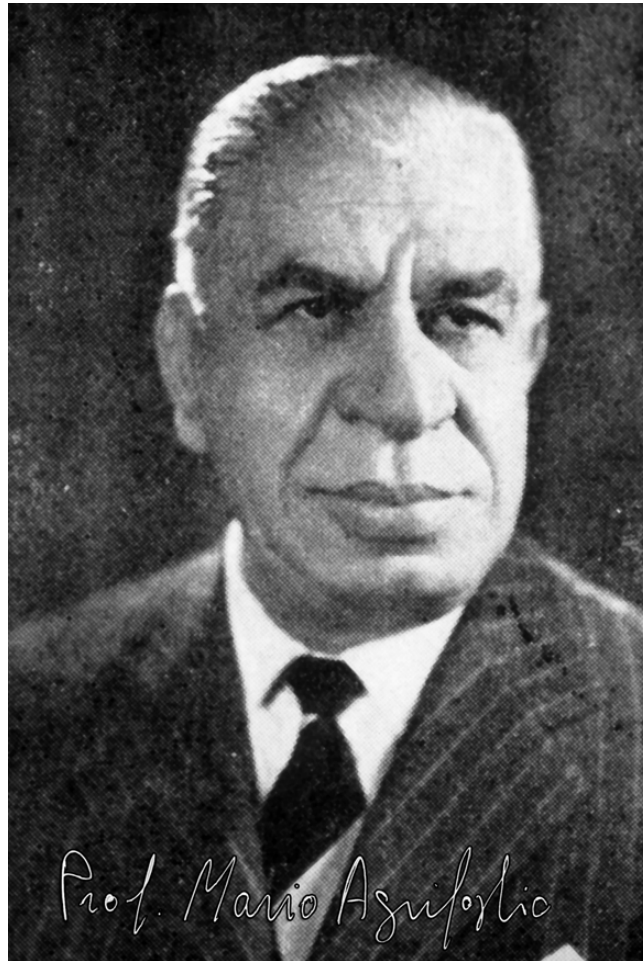
In 1951, when I was enrolled in the third year of Medical School, the subject of surgery was still separated into its two components of Special Surgical Pathology and Foundations of Clinical Medicine - a two-year clerkship for third- and fourth-year students - and General Surgery and Surgical Therapy - this, too, a two-year clerkship for fifth- and sixth-year students. The holders of these two chairs were, respectively, Professor Mario Agrifoglio and Professor Luigi Stropeni.

I had entered as a student of Surgical Pathology, and here I began to learn something about surgical science. At the time, clinical clerks did a bit of everything, from analysis laboratory work, to compiling medical records, to the handling of instrumentation in the operating room.

And my first Teacher was Professor Agrifoglio. He had been Clinical Surgeon in Sassari, and from there returned to his native Liguria having been appointed Chair of Surgical Pathology at the University of Genoa. He was well-known and highly esteemed by my family for having operated my grandfather for prostate cancer some years earlier. Agrifoglio was without doubt a great surgeon, and I recall that his School covered all fields of general surgery, including those disciplines that today are recognized specializations: vascular, urologic, neurosurgical, orthopedic. I still recall with a certain sense of amazement those operations for intracranial hematomas that the general surgeon of today would never even dream of performing. But the chapter that he developed so exceptionally, placing himself at the forefront of the then surgical community, was no doubt that of thoracic-pulmonary surgery. When we (the use of the plural is purposeful, since by this time I felt a true sense of belonging to the school) moved from Building 1 of the San Martino Civic Hospital to Building 2, home to the Surgical Clinic even at that time headed by Professor Stropeni, a special division was created, transforming a wing of the building already used as a ward into a facility with single bed rooms and outfitted with all the accouterments needed for the care of thoracic-pulmonary surgery patients. Pulmonary resections, the removal of mediastinal masses and all radical procedures of the thoracic wall for the treatment of pleural mesothelioma were all achieved with excellent results, which the school carried forward with the work of its pupils Ardau, Cordella, Miglietta and Giuseppe D'Aste, who became an important surgeon, above all in the field of thoracic-pulmonary surgery that the Teacher had taught.

Who was Mario Agrifoglio, and what was he like? He was a fine and distinguished person with a beautiful family: two sons, Ernesto and Giorgio, who in their own right became, respectively, Chaired Professor of Orthopedic Surgery in Genoa and of Vascular Surgery in Milan, and Mrs. Agrifoglio, an elegant and highly esteemed woman.

But what was he like? His kind and courteous ways contrasted with the features of his face and the tone of his voice. He was, in fact, acromegalic. How his large hands and knotty fingers were able to move with such sensitivity, finesse and precision in the operating field was truly remarkable. But should he get cross in the operating room - and in those days the surly surgeon was the vogue - his voice became thunderous and it was us young students who were the most startled.



Professor Mario Agrifoglio

When the assisting surgeon did not act according to his intentions, the reproach that had become famous, pronounced with such a vehement and vibrant, though reverberant, voice was: “My maid would serve me far better!”, or the variant: “Next time I’ll have my maid help me!”. And when we young interns handed him surgical instruments (in those days the figure of a specialized instrument handler didn’t exist), and when we had carefully arranged the same according to canonical order - scalpel, anatomic and surgical clips, the Kocher, etc., all aligned in the first row, and in the second row the more cumbersome instruments, needle holders, retractors, etc. - if we were not ready to hand him the instrument he wanted in that moment, here is when his hands, those enormous hands - would come unbound and would reveal their true size. That enormous hand that with anger and spite would scatter all of the instruments on the table just to gratify itself by choosing the one that served him at that moment, well it was then that that hand would become for the poor instrument handler a misfortune indeed, because it was his task to hastily straighten up all the instruments. And if this wasn’t done, the fury of the Director’s hands would not subside. This is why I remember that hand to this day!

I passed all of my clerkship years as a student in Surgical Pathology - Building 1, prepared my dissertation thesis there, and in November 1954 Professor Agrifoglio presented me for my degree. In 1955 Professor Stropeni retired, and Professor Agrifoglio was called on to fill the vacant Chair of General Surgery at the University of Genoa. I remember well that day when we gathered all our belongings and moved to Building 2, home to the Clinic. And what a day it was! But in 1960 retirement beckoned Professor Agrifoglio, as well, and the Chair of General Surgery was once again vacant.

Professor Luigi Stropeni was appointed to the Chair of General Surgery (Gen. Surg.) of the University of Genoa in 1947; he had previously directed Surgical Pathology (Surg. Path.) at the University of Turin, a position he very successfully held ever since 1932. But not everyone remembers that soon after earning his medical degree he became Assistant Professor at the Obstetrics and Gynecology Clinic in Genoa, and it was here that he was destined to conclude his long career.

During my years at the university, although I was officially enrolled as student in Surg. Path., I had to attend Gen. Surg. in my fifth and sixth years in order to prepare for the examination. I was thus able to make the acquaintance not only of the Director, but also of some of his collaborators.

Professor Stropeni was an elderly man when I met him, and only a few years later he would reach retirement age. He had a calm face, the little hair he had left was white, and he was very courteous and elegant in his ways. He had a lovely family: his wife, Alessandra - or better yet, Lady Alessandra, as well-to-do sitting rooms would call her - was a beautiful woman: tall, elegant, distinguished and austere. Indeed, she gave the impression of a lady-of-rank belonging to the Piedmont aristocracy. They had two daughters, Anna Carlotta and Giovannella. They lived in a luxurious villa surrounded by a large park on the hill of Albaro.

Stropeni was a great surgeon, excelling in diagnostics and possessing technical skills that made him legendary for the speed with which he worked. I recall having taken part in some of his operations, and the stories told - that the time he committed to a gastric resection varied between forty minutes to an hour - were quite true. And in those days mechanical suturing devices had not yet been invented! To be sure, ill-wishers insinuated that his sutures were not always flawless, but in those times weeds could sprout even in the best-kept lawns! What remains for me about Stropeni is his magnificent, unequalled "*Trattato di Chirurgia*", whose first editions (1949-1963), the same ones that helped me prepare for the examination in Gen. Surg., were written in collaboration with C. Colombo and thereafter with Paletto, Maggi, Masenti and Massaioli. It is still an authoritative textbook, and one that I often refer to for my studies.



Professor Luigi Stropeni

When I was attending the wards and operating rooms of Gen. Surg., among the various assistants and collaborators of the Clinic one caught my eye and attracted my attention and curiosity most of all: a tall young man, balding but with a moustache and the airs of a braggart, often with a pipe between his teeth. I would meet up again with this character, who represented a great deal for my future and for my career as a surgeon: it was Mario Battezzati.

In the slightly less than ten years of university activity in Genoa Stropeni never succeeded in obtaining a chair for any of his pupils. Among these, the one who would have most deserved such a promotion was precisely Battezzati. However, relations with Agrifoglio and his school were never idyllic, and so Battezzati, without his patron and protector, emigrated to Turin to the General Surgery Clinic directed by Dogliotti. It was here that he would be able to complete his academic agenda and gather the fruits of his merits: the Chair of Surgical Pathology at the University of Parma.

Professor Edmondo Malan joined the Genoese Athenaeum in 1955 when, with Stropeni's retirement and Agrifoglio's appointment to General Surgery, he assumed the direction of the chair of Surg. Path. left vacant by this latter. In 1960, with the retirement of Agrifoglio, Edmondo Malan became Director of General Surgery (Building 2). Simultaneously, Professor Giuseppe D'Aste was entrusted with the direction of Surgical Pathology (Building 1). This tumultuous turnover of figures at the direction of the University of Genoa School of Surgery left us young students rather disoriented. Faced with this predicament, I chose to follow Professor D'Aste, i.e., the School to which until then I had belonged, and thus returned to Building 1. And this would be the first of just one of the many times I would come and go between the two facilities.



Professor Edmondo Malan

When he arrived in Genoa, Edmondo Malan was a vigorous 40-year-old: tall, with a trimmed moustache, well-groomed blond hair with a part to the side, and an aristocratic bearing. With years, this look became ever-more accentuated, likely the result of the widespread notoriety that the man had come to enjoy both for his surgical skills and his elegant demeanor. His lessons and scientific lectures in the Medical Academy were always delivered in a crystal-clear manner and with an approach that I would define as stately. One could have put in his mouth the words that Professor Paride Stefanini proffered to a journalist who had asked: “Do you consider yourself a baron of surgery?”. To which Stefanini answered: “No, I am a prince of surgery”.

He was a great surgeon, versed above all in vascular diseases: indeed, he established the ward of Vascular Surgery in Genoa, which was subsequently transformed into a University Chair. Young as I was at the time, I never had much interaction with him during his tenure in Genoa, nor, for that matter, with any of his collaborators - Occhipinti, Ruberti, Malchiodi, Serrano and others - many of whom would go on to have brilliant university careers.

In the Academic Year 1960-1961, the Genoese School of Medicine opted to directly appoint the Chair of Surgical Pathology. And it was such that Professor Mario Battezzati returned to Genoa after his interim in Turin and his professorship at the University of Parma.

As I’ve already said, I had met Professor Battezzati when he was still a member of Stropeni’s staff, and I’d had the opportunity to appreciate his gifts as both man and teacher. For me, moreover, he was extremely likable. For these reasons, and because I was already part of the staff (as appointed Assistant) of Surgical Pathology, I intentionally asked Professor Battezzati to take me in among his assistants. And I thereby became his pupil, he my teacher.

Some of his assistants who had been with him for five years in Parma followed him to Genoa: Alberto Tagliaferro, Pietro Falcidieno, Ippolito Donini. Among these three, particularly deserving of being remembered is the second, Professor Falcidieno: an excellent teacher of surgical technique with whom I spent a multitude of hours in the operating room, learning from him the secrets of surgical skill. As he worked, surrounded by us young apprentices, he would impart the rules of surgical gestures with maxims that he himself invented and that were, without a doubt, extremely useful from a teaching standpoint for explicative and mnemonic effectiveness. Here’s one example of how he taught why a Kocher’s clip had to be left in the position in which it had been applied: “*Woman quiet as she stays, the clip as it lays*”. In his younger days he had been a lead player in the “Baistrocchi”, the medical students’ theatrical company that in Genoa enjoyed and continues to enjoy resounding success. He also loved to paint, and many of his works were worthy of expositions. He was an artist - perhaps a poet - something that many a surgeon should be.

In 1965 Professor Battezzati assumed the Direction of the Genoese Surgical Clinic (Building no. 2), which had been left vacant by the transfer of Professor Malan to the University of Milan. And, of course, many of us followed him: this would again be but one of my repeated comings and goings from Buildings no. 1 and no. 2, and vice versa.

It was here that Professor Battezzati’s organizational skills had the chance to be recognized and admired. Building number two of the San Martino Civic Hospital had become the forerunner of what years later would appear as a great innovation: the Single-block Surgical Pavilion, a structure that, because it gathered different disciplines and various services under one roof, made the whole self-sufficient. As such, the ground floor hosted directional units: the library; Directors’, Assistants’ and secretarial offices; facilitated access to the Lecture Hall; operating rooms. The upper floors were reserved for hospitalization. Situated underground were analysis laboratories, radiology, the blood bank, the nuclear medicine laboratory and the experimental division. We worked here until 1972 when the new University Single-block Surgical Pavilion was completed and could host the Surgical Clinic and other University Chairs. But in the years that preceded this event, Battezzati had

intervened personally - and with the help of all of us - to ensure that the new facility was created with rational criteria that he had already applied in the Clinic's previous site. For years, an easel (indeed, like that of an artist) mounted in the Surgical Clinic displayed enormous and numerous blueprints depicting possible plans - floor by floor, ward by ward - of the structure being constructed for us. And we often found ourselves discussing these plans, only to find that once actually put into practice, the execution of the works faithfully reflected what we - or, better yet, what Professor Battezzati - had envisaged.

The Surgical Clinic directed by Professor Battezzati was varyingly spread throughout the new building: the third floor hosted the Directors' and Assistants' offices, the conference hall, and patients' rooms in the front wing; on the fourth floor more patients' rooms and the operating rooms; laboratories on the fifth floor; more offices for Assistants on the sixth floor; outpatient facilities and the library were located on the ground floor; finally, a large experimental division with two operating rooms, an ample animal facility, and still more laboratories were located on the ground floor. And it was so that Professor Battezzati was able to achieve what he had created at a smaller scale in the former location in Building no. 2.

And now I'd like to try to depict the person and the figure of Professor Battezzati: certainly not an easy task, given the man's complex and varying human nature. Years had passed since I had first met him, when was still a member of Professor Stropeni's group, and overall he had not lost those traits that had originally elicited my admiration. He was a tall, vigorous and elegant man, with a round, moustached face and a progressively balding pate. He had a stern, often frowning, gaze; he seldom laughed, at most he broke a smile now and then. He hadn't lost the braggart attitude that had caught my attention years earlier. He no longer had a pipe in his mouth, but frequently a Tuscan cigar, which, when lit, alerted everyone of the Director's presence or arrival. As all of his pupils remember, Professor Battezzati would come to watch us operate, often because his aid was solicited, and in these instances he kept that cigar in his mouth, maintaining (rightly so) that its ashes were anyway sterile.

He lived with his wife Laura and his son Michele in a fine beachfront home on the sea. And how he loved the sea! His "boats" became famous, because these were, in fact, luxurious yachts with which he moved from port to port throughout the Mediterranean. He also loved cars: with his BMW he would race, often at high speeds, from one city to another for his extra-curricular surgical duties or to attend conferences and meetings. When he could he would travel by sea, and his landings would leave conference participants awestruck to say the least.

He had an intense surgical agenda, and his operations were always noteworthy for the skill with which they were performed and their instructional effectiveness. He was extremely fast, at times excessively so. In these cases, when he was in a hurry, he would step up the pace of the operation's stages, generally the radical phases, after which he would remove his gloves and with an authoritative mien order to the unfortunate assistant to "perform hemostasis", and would then leave.



Professor Mario Battezzati

Above I described Professor Battezzati as a stern and austere character, but this was an attitude of his that more often than not did not correspond to his true nature. And his passion for fast cars and luxurious motorboats could well mislead others about his external demeanor, which, once the ice was broken and one got to know him well, would unexpectedly disappear. He then became a “playtime pal”, because the mask that had been worn with time and that could have been understood as a means of defense - even a mechanism to overcome a certain shyness - instantly fell.

At the time, the soccer games between the Surgical Clinic and other clinical divisions had become epic events: we played on a field in the outskirts of Genoa, and precisely in a small village

called San Desiderio. Everyone always attended these games and the support was intense, above all for Battezzati. And when we took the season once, one of us organized a great party in his yard: an immense fire illuminated the scene, with everyone singing and dancing around it. And at a certain point Professor Battezzati arrived with a carton filled with bottles of champagne, and again everyone would dance: and how the Director could dance a mazurka!

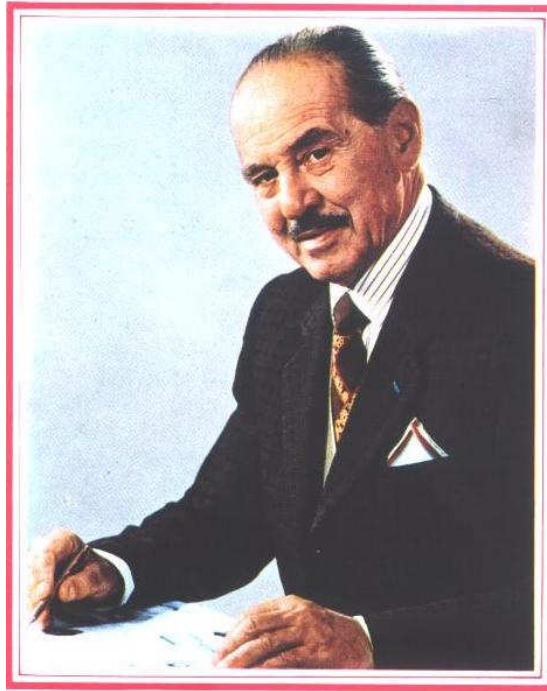
On particular occasions the Director invited his assistants and employees to dinner in “*trattorie*” renowned for the quality of the dishes they served in pleasant localities in the surroundings of Genoa. These were generally festive dinners, and when the wine had reached a sufficient threshold, the quips, the jokes, and above all the pranks became numerous and loud. What amused Professor Battezzati most of all on these occasions was the cutting of ties! At a certain moment he would take out a pair of scissors and - especially to those sitting next to him - *snip!* with a move that was at once deft, swift, and particularly on first encounters unexpected, he would neatly crop the tie of his dinner companion to this latter’s disbelief and (it goes unsaid) chagrin.

The Director’s office was an ample room with large windows, filled with light. One corner had a fireplace that his secretary - the legendary Miss Collinzani - lit in the Winter. We would frequently gather around the Teacher in this room to discuss various issues, problems concerning the Clinic, patients, academic policy, and also just to exchange small talk. These meetings would for the most part take place in the late morning, when the operating rooms had emptied and when ward-related duties had been taken care of. At a certain point Professor Battezzati would take out a bottle of whiskey and would offer a sip to everyone. But one of us didn’t care much for this liquor, as he preferred aquavit. One day this objector to whiskey was surprised to see himself offered a glass of aquavit, and he was almost touched by the gesture.

Professor Battezzati was not only a great surgeon: he was a Teacher who loved his pupils and, in turn, he made himself loved by these latter. He took pains to follow them and assist them in the pursuit and progression of their careers. Those who took up positions as Chief Surgeons: Tagliaferro, Gemma and Anfossi at the Galliera Hospital of Genoa, Falcidieno at the Bolzaneto Hospital of Genoa; Cavaliere, first at Fossano and then at San Paolo Hospital of Savona; Becchi first at Biella and then at Villa Scassi Hospital of Genoa Sampierdarena; Calcagno at Santa Margherita, Berretti at Lavagna, Guerra at Bordighera, Stabilini at Novi Ligure. Others instead took up University Chairs: Donini at Ferrara, Bresadola at Udine; Bachi, Berti Riboli, Civalleri, Gianetta, Mattioli, Scopinaro and Torre at Genoa. Still other students assumed the direction of specialized Chairs at the University of Genoa, such as Belardi in Vascular Surgery and Passerone in Heart Surgery.

Even when he retired he remained in constant touch with us, his advice and help continuing to prove invaluable. Then the day of his illness, and our apprehension. And his pupils and all those who knew him remember him always with affection and immutable gratitude.

In 1965, when Battezzati moved to Building no. 2 and thereby assumed the direction of the Surgical Clinic, Surgical Pathology - Building no. 1 - was left open, and was subsequently entrusted to Professor Egidio Tosatti, summoned by the School of Medicine from the University of Siena.



Professor Egidio Tosatti

Professor Tosatti came from the Roman school of Paolucci and had numerous students, many of whom would soon undertake brilliant university careers. Battezzati objected considerably to this colleague's arrival, one because he had another candidate in mind, and two, because there was a genuine dislike of one for the other. Tosatti is remembered for a particular humanistic culture, and a propensity to pronounce Latin maxims. He would use a particularly humorous one to show his disapproval of peers, who during faculty meetings would let go in long-winded and weary oratories: "*Strepitus uniuersae suae semper olet*". When the Surgical Clinic was split, Tosatti became Director of the second Chair.

As I alluded to above, many of his students became chaired university professors: Armenio in Siena; Prior, Cariati, Casaccia, Valente and Campisi in Genoa.

Following the separation of Chairs that began in the early seventies, the direction of one Chair of Surgical Pathology was entrusted to Professor Antonio Ruffo. He was a very likeable person, very elegant and kind in his manners, and the way he spoke betrayed his origins from the Region of Piedmont. He came from the University of Turin, where he had been a student of Professor Dogliotti. When the Surgical Clinic was left without a director after the retirement of Professor Battezzati, Ruffo took control. Some of his students, such as Motta and Ferraris, were subsequently summoned to direct Chairs at the University of Genoa, while others, such as Catrambone and Ratto, became Chief Surgeons in hospitals.

Beginning with the sixties and progressively throughout subsequent decades, university Chairs increasingly multiplied. As such, a chair in clinical medicine could easily be duplicated, triplicated, or even quadruplicated, and the same happened in surgical disciplines. In Genoa the phenomenon was less rampant; nevertheless, the Chairs in Surgical Semiotics, Surgical Pathology and Clinical

Surgery grew two-fold. But at the same time another process was underway, and that was the fragmentation of fundamental disciplines with the creation of specialized courses. Recall that, in the era of General Surgery of Professor Agrifoglio and to large extent that of Professor Battezzati, operations of every kind were performed, as was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter: as years passed, however, activities in fundamental surgical disciplines were progressively modified. Programs saw the gradual disappearance of operations on the heart and its large vessels, on most of the urinary and gynecological systems, on the respiratory tract, and so on. Simultaneously, Heart Surgery, Vascular Surgery, Thoracic Surgery were born, and Urology and Gynecology were considerably enhanced.

But as years passed - and here we are reaching the present - another, more upsetting, phenomenon was coming into play: namely, the profound deterioration of what had been traditional instruction in surgery. Fundamental disciplines vanished, or better still, the exact wording and the underpinnings of General Surgery and Surgical Pathology fell into disuse. We must remember that the complete original appellations of these two disciplines were *General Surgery and Surgical Therapy* for the former and *Special Surgical Pathology and Foundations of Clinical Medicine* for the latter: not only labels, but names which thoroughly defined teaching objectives. Corresponding courses were thus and are still substituted by so-called “channels” that teach endocrinological surgery to some, the gastroenterological tract to others, etc., etc.

The medical student is thus confronted with numerous instructors, often uncoordinated, and above all is left without that guiding spirit embodied in the Teacher, who could well be more or less worthy, but who, nonetheless, is one, and one with whom the student can deal eye-to-eye.

To conclude, the institutional tasks constituting the mission of the Chaired Professor of Surgery - namely, *medical care*, i.e., the management of the patient, together with the amplitude of his surgical prowess; *teaching*, i.e., the keynote lecture and the direct and long-standing contact between the Teacher and students; and *scientific research*, i.e., the possibility to draw from an infinite experience stemming from the management of patients and the consequent multitude of clinical cases and countless operations likely performed in all fields of surgery - created a foundation and an identity such to confer on the Holder of the Chair, in our case the Clinical Surgeon or the Surgical Pathologist, the distinction of a true Teacher, as well as a prestige and influence that could well make people say: “That is a Baron of Surgery”.
