



In memory of Professor Gallieno Denardo, ICTP Italy



K R Sreenivasan (left) and Gallieno Denardo (right)

A Few Thoughts on Gallieno Denardo

When Gallieno Denardo passed away on July 23, 2007 suddenly, I felt as though I had lost a brother. At a meeting we organized at ICTP in his honor, I spoke passionately about him and recalled some of our interactions. Years have since gone by, and while that initial intensity of emotion has naturally softened, my affection and respect for him remain undiminished. I would like to take this opportunity to recall a few things about him — in particular, the role he played in my accepting the position of ICTP Director.

I have written elsewhere that I was offered that position without having applied for it formally or gone through an interview. When I first learned about the offer (“It is yours if you want it,” said the chairman of the selection committee on the phone), I sought advice from many friends who knew ICTP better than I did. Their consensus was unanimous: I should accept. They felt that ICTP had been adrift for some time and needed someone with a “moral compass” to guide it.

To assess the situation for myself, I visited ICTP sometime soon after. Gallieno was asked to take me to Elettra Sincrotrone Trieste to explore possible lab space (where, later, Joe Niemela and I set up a thermal convection lab). The 45-minute drive each way provided ample time for conversation. Gallieno asked why I was still hesitant, and I explained my two main concerns. First, as a non-Italian, I might not have the ear of the Italian government if I wanted to steer ICTP in new directions. Second, I was not a high-energy physicist, and therefore knew only a small part of that important community personally.

Gallieno responded with quiet conviction. He said that every Italian scientist he had spoken to was supportive of my appointment, and that my being non-Italian would, if anything, be an advantage. ICTP, he reminded me, had long expanded beyond high-energy physics even in Abdus Salam’s time, and what mattered was scientific integrity and breadth. He emphasized that my credentials — strengthened by my years at Yale — and my natural affinity for the developing world would serve the Center well.

It did not take long after I arrived at ICTP to realize that Gallieno had been more or less right on both counts. I was deeply touched when, some months later, Nicola Cabibbo — a highly respected Italian physicist — wrote to say that he would be happy to introduce me to any Italian scientist that I wished to meet. There was only one discordant note as I remember. On the very day Gallieno took me to the synchrotron, I met Daniele Amati, then Director of SISSA and an influential voice in ICTP's affairs. He remarked, "You don't need to take the job to be involved with ICTP. We'll engage you somehow." That overt note of dissuasion only strengthened my resolve to accept the position. Except for one or two local scientists, modestly accomplished themselves, no one ever made me feel unwelcome.

That first conversation with Gallieno remains one of the most consequential I have had concerning ICTP. As I began to understand the workings of the Center, I came to appreciate even more his deep commitment to its mission and to the lives of the scientists it served. Though mindful of the interests of Italian researchers, especially those in Trieste, he fully grasped that ICTP's unique strength lay in combining scientific excellence with service to the developing world.

Gallieno had a clear vision of the need to emphasize applied areas — optics, in particular. At that time, ICTP had little expertise in optics, and Gallieno himself was not an expert in that field. Yet he worked diligently to connect ICTP with capable scientists and organizations around the world, and his persistence bore fruit. Joe Niemela, in particular, successfully anchored ICTP's optics programs after Gallieno, drawing new visitors and collaborators. As head of ICTP's Office of External Activities for many years, Gallieno set a tone of professionalism and empathy — combining care for individuals with thoughtful deliberation in decision-making.

Another domain in which Gallieno was especially helpful to me was in navigating relations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). He was not particularly fond of UNESCO's bureaucratic culture but held IAEA in high regard. We attended several of its annual meetings together, where he introduced me to many influential people. Always proper and dignified, he nevertheless tolerated — even enjoyed — my occasional informality: walking up a down-escalator or retying my tie in front of a visiting minister when dissatisfied with the knot, etc. He would smile in amused disbelief but never took offense. Once, he told me how refreshing it was to work with me — contrasting it, with gentle humor, to the days when people would ask Salam whether it was "OK to agree with him." ("You mean to disagree with him?" I asked. "No," he replied, "I mean to agree with him.") That was Gallieno's dry wit. Our working relationship was a delight, and it certainly enhanced my experience at ICTP, despite the occasional irritants that I encountered.

Gallieno was always well prepared. Whenever he came to me with a request, he had done his homework thoroughly, armed with good reasoning and background. I respected his judgment deeply and valued the fact that he never sought personal credit and was happy to share recognition with others.

I greatly missed Gallieno when he passed away. It took several people to fill the void he left, but the institution carried on. I am very pleased that this special issue is being dedicated to his memory, and I am grateful to Dr Joe Niemela and Professor María Yzuel for organizing it. I am honored to contribute this personal remembrance of a colleague and friend whose integrity, warmth, and quiet effectiveness enriched the spirit of ICTP.

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