

GINO FANO

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In loving memory of my father Gino Fano

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In Loving Memory of my Father Gino Fano (*).

ROBERT FANO

I am Robert Fano, the second son of Gino Fano. Both my older brother Ugo and I attended our father's lectures; he at the University of Torino where he graduated in mathematics in 1934, and I at the Politecnico where I was a student for four years before leaving for the United States in 1939. I vividly remember my father lecturing with a very long ruler in his hand for drawing on the blackboard. He used to swing it like a sword, and when he took a horizontal plane the student's heads in the front row would bend back! Through a combination of genes and family traditions, my brother Ugo became a professor of theoretical physics at the University of Chicago and I became a professor of electrical engineering and computer science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Internet is great! I first heard about this Fano Conference on July 26 at the dinner of a Fano Symposium held at Harvard University in memory of my brother Ugo, who died in February 2001. I quickly located the Web page for this Conference and that of the Mathematics Department and was able to start an e-mail conversation with Prof. Conte. He turned out to be the current holder of my father's geometry chair as well as the primary organizer of this Conference. He kindly invited me to attend the Conference, but I am old enough (almost 85) that I am no longer inclined to cross the Atlantic on the spur of the moment. I agreed, however, to prepare the following remarks about my father to be read at the Conference. Since his career and contributions are detailed elsewhere, I will limit my remarks to what I know about his background and personal life and to my own memories of him.

Gino Fano was the son of Ugo and Angelica Fano and had four younger sisters, born in quick succession. He was born on January 5, 1871, just a few months after Italian troops had occupied Roma, thereby completing the

(*) Some of the information contained herein was obtained from my brother's autobiography: Ugo Fano, «The Memories of an Atomic Physicist for my Children and Grandchildren», Physics Essays, Volume 13, Number 2-3, June/September 2000, 176-196.

unification of Italy. His father was a fervent patriot, and had served as an officer in Garibaldi's volunteer army in the 1866 war of liberation. I well remember a picture of Garibaldi with his handwritten dedication to my grandfather; it disappeared during World War II. It is not surprising, therefore, that my grandfather's dream was to have his only son become a career officer in the Italian Army. Thus, he sent him, at the age of 12, to a military preparatory school in Milano; I heard also that he was concerned about what effect growing up at home with four younger sisters might have on his son's character!

Upon completion of the military school, my father dutifully enlisted in the army, according to his father's wishes. However, by then, he had developed an interest in the sciences, and a military career no longer appealed to him. Also, he had acquired his father's strong will, and decided to defy his father's wishes and leave the army before making the final commitment. He won the battle with the help of his mother. So it was that in the fall 1888 he started his studies at the University of Torino. Father's initial registration was in the engineering program. However, his mathematical potential soon attracted the attention of his recitation instructor who persuaded him to switch his registration to mathematics. His name was Guido Castelnuovo. Thus began a close personal and professional friendship that lasted throughout their lives. He completed his mathematics degree in 1892 and remained at the University through the academic year 1892-93 as assistant to Prof. D'Ovidio.

My father and mother (Rosetta Cassin) were married on October 4, 1911. They settled in one of the apartments in the building at Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, 105 at the corner of Corso Vinzaglio, where they lived until 1939, when they had to seek refuge in Switzerland. My brother and I were born and grew up there. Father had his daily exercise walking from home to the University in via Po and back. It was a pleasant walk, under the «portici» all the way (after the construction of the new Via Roma). On the way, he would always check the time on his pocket watch against that on the clock at the railroad station. I recall that he used to spend mornings, when not lecturing, in his office in the mathematics library of which he was the director. Professors did not have private offices in those days. He stayed home after lunch, working at his desk. His study was also a sort of family room; father had a great power of concentration and was able to keep working while we were chatting away.

Father was, without question, a 19th century gentleman: in his appearance, his demeanor and his views. He was also a gentle man; I do not recall his ever raising his voice in anger. He had strongly held views, but tolerated and respected people with different views. He was also very friendly and sociable. Although he was not very interested in music, we went as a family to concerts

and operas. He could not carry a tune, but he tried on occasions to sing to everybody's amusement. He was a modest man who shied away from anything that would single him out, particularly any show of wealth. He always travelled in second class unless my mother was with him.

Father had a very remarkable memory and was a walking encyclopedia on almost any subject including trains and train schedules. When travelling he would get out of the car at major stops to investigate the composition of the train, and get back on his car at the very last minute, with my mother getting a heart attack in the process. He was fluent in French, German, and English and he told me of having spoken in Latin with a priest in a country in which he could not communicate otherwise. I was in the habit of having him check my homework, particularly in Latin and mathematics. I vividly remember the time when I had made a stupid mistake in my mathematics work and I was upset about it. He said: «Do not feel bad. Everybody makes mistakes. The important thing is to be able to find them and correct them». I had a lot of practice in chasing after my own mistakes and I got pretty good at it; I often quoted my father to my own students and children.

The 1938 dismissal from his professorship, his having to seek refuge in Switzerland and the dispersion of his family were very traumatic for my father because they amounted to the collapse of the three pillars of his life: his family, his Country and his profession. Those events also caused the only serious disagreement between my parents: my mother wanted to follow her children to the United States, while my father, as he told me before my departure, would never go to a country likely to be at war with Italy. They adapted their lives to the realities of the times, and lived for seven years in a room of modest size in a small hotel in Lausanne, with father resuming his work routine at a small desk in that room. He also lectured in a program for Italian students at a Swiss refugee camp. When he came over to the United States in August 1946, he told me that he had stopped active research in the middle of the war. When I asked him what prompted him to do so, he said that his work was getting inefficient because too often he had to read papers for a second time. Just think of that! Having to read papers more than once!

My parent's routine after the war was to spend winters in the United States and summers in Italy, at the family villa near Verona; the only exception was the winter 1949-50 that was spent in Torino at the invitation of the University. I last saw my father in August 1952 and I remember him walking in the garden of his villa holding the hand of my little daughter who had just turned two. He was working at the time on the paper commemorating his old friend Guido Castelnuovo, that he was to present the following December at the Accademia dei Lincei. He had just completed its preparation, when he had to be taken to the hospital in Verona where he died on November 8, 1952. He was buried in his family tomb in Mantova.

I was very moved by the thoughtfulness of the University of Torino in commemorating the 50th anniversary of my father's death with this international conference. Father's five grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren join me in expressing our gratitude to the members of the organizing committee for their efforts in planning the conference, and I thank the conference participants for honoring my father's memory by their presence. My father would have been very pleased. My best wishes for a successful conference.

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