



In the INAF Board of Directors and Beyond

Fragments of memory

Salvatore Sciortino¹

Istituto Nazionale di Astrofisica – Osservatorio Astronomico di Palermo, Piazza del Parlamento, 1, I-90134 Palermo, Italy
e-mail: salvatore.sciortino@inaf.it

Abstract. As an homage to his memory I present a few selected moments of my personal professional interactions with Nichi from the days of the first meeting of the INAF Board of Directors till his tireless action as INAF President. This contribution has been translated by Andrea Possenti from the originally provided Italian version.

1. The early days

I had known Nichi since my university years when we were both students of the Physics degree course in Palermo, he one year ahead of me. He was a very bright student, probably the brightest in his class. When choosing the Thesis, an important moment for those who decided to undertake a research thesis, we both chose Astrophysics, he with the group led by Livio Scarsi, I with the group led by Giuseppe (Pippo) Vaiana. Within a few years he became a university researcher, first in Palermo and then, within a few years, having dedicated himself full time to radio astronomy, in Bologna.

2. The experience in the Board of INAF Directors

For many years our paths separated and we did not happen to meet, until one fine day in 2001 we found ourselves, in the newly born INAF, at the first meeting of the Directors of the Astronomical Observatories, as new directors: I of the Palermo Observatory, and he

from the Cagliari Observatory. Thinking back to that period, I believe that one thing that ultimately united us was the common ambitious goal of making the Observatories we managed to become modern and accomplished research centers like other larger (and complex) Italian Observatories. Succeeding in this enterprise was not easy because the level of resources available to INAF was, to put it mildly, quite limited and therefore to pursue this goal, a "generalist" approach could not be adopted, i.e. assuming to develop in parallel many lines of research, but instead it was necessary to adopt a very focused approach that leveraged existing strengths. Nichi masterfully managed to enhance the opportunity that the creation of SRT offered and the Cagliari Observatory took off irreversibly. Among the endless, often quite animated, discussions in the Board of Directors, I distinctly remember, I think it was in 2005, the time when he pointed out, with a tone between serious and facetious, that agreeing on sharing even a small cake was difficult, but ultimately possible, but the real challenge would come when the "cuts", that is, the re-

ductions in resources that were on the horizon, would have to be shared.

3. Toward the Presidency

The ability to clearly analyze the situation and seize opportunities were his hallmark that became crucial on many occasions during his Presidency. When Nichi took over the management of the SRT project, leaving the direction of the Cagliari Observatory, the opportunities to meet again became very sporadic, until he happened to meet us casually at the airport and to start discussing how some events in INAF were evolving; during our brief conversation he explained to me why he was upset and I remember that I told him that, in my opinion, the only way to get out of it was to "take the sword by the tip" by exposing himself in the first person. I don't know if that conversation had any effect or not, because it never happened to discuss it. I soon learned that Nichi had put forward his candidacy for the INAF Presidency.

4. In the Presidency

A few weeks after taking over the Presidency, Nichi, at the invitation of the Director of the Observatory of Palermo, came to Palermo to realize firsthand how unsatisfactory the logistics fragmentation of INAF in Palermo was (and remains). Whence it was (and remains) crucial the program for the construction of a new INAF headquarters in Palermo. That was the occasion for a new, this time longer, conversation on the state of INAF, the major problems, some of his ideas on what to do, etc. etc. Towards the end of the visit I remember that I told him that, given the complexity of the situation, I was available to help him as long as this did not imply having to move to Rome in an (almost) permanent way, which I did not consider compatible with my family structure. After a few days he looked for me on the phone and told me that he was convinced of the need to set up 4 offices at the Presidency to support his action and asked me to take on the responsibility of one of these, which then became two in a few days. With these responsibilities I have instructed on behalf of the President a certain

number of issues among which I recall those relating to the Doctorate, to the reopening of an institutional communication channel with ASI of which I convinced him of the urgent need, to the redesign of the INAF Performance Plan, to the process that led INAF to promote, in concert at the National Academy of Sciences, known as the XL, of the National Committee for the celebrations of the Bicentenary of the birth of Angelo Secchi, SJ.

However, I think more important were the conversations we had from time to time or when I went to Monte Mario or on the phone, often after dinner and / or on Sunday afternoon (we had adopted the custom of asking us via whatsapp "Are you phone-able?") and / or when he sent me, from time to time, the draft of a document he was working on and on which he liked to have my opinion.

Nichi used to do many things in the first person, I remember that I jokingly told him: "*Here is our President / Worker in full action*", and he wrote himself the documents he considered crucial. I soon realized that these conversations and my remarks on the draft documents were a kind of dialectical stimulus that he used to refine his reflections. I remember how faced with an initiative in which he recognized the serious commitment of those who were carrying it forward, he posed himself with an attitude of positive support for what was possible.

I have seen this character trait emerge, better this talent of his, recurrently, and, among the many cases, I remember a discussion on the difficulties (and the way to overcome them) that had arisen for a winner of a program on European funding that he had to recruit of young people, and the interest and support for the "GAL Hassin" of Isnello where he was struck by the quality, determination and creativity of those who had conceived and was carrying out the initiative. I like to conclude by remembering him in a moment of lightheartedness, witnessed by the photo taken with my mobile phone, a few days before his sudden death, while, during a festive event organized at GAL Hassin, he welcomes Michel Mayor, Nobel Prize in Physics 2019, smiling on the stage.



Fig. 1. Prof. Nichi D'Amico on the stage at Isnello (Sicily), for a public event organized at GAL Hassin during the summer 2020, some days before his death. On the left of the picture, the Nobel Prize 2019 for the Physics, prof. Michel Mayor.