

## Antonio Zampolli

### Martin Kay

Every second Saturday through the summer of 1956, I left Victoria station in London charged with escorting some three hundred holiday makers who had never left their homeland before to a variety of sunny places between Genoa and Rome. On the intervening Saturdays, I left Roma Termini to collect those that had been delivered two weeks before by somebody else, and took them back to London. On arriving in Rome, I took a long hot shower in the place that large Italian stations provided for that purpose and headed for the Piazza Navona to feast my eyes on its three Bernini fountains, to watch cheerful children who play and laugh and never cry, and to consume a cool half bottle of Orvieto. I loved the Piazza Navona and could regain my physical and mental strength there better than anywhere else.

Some forty years later, the telephone rang in the middle of the night at an hour when good news rarely arrives. It was Antonio saying that he had kept his part of our bargain, and found me an apartment on the top floor, overlooking the fountains. It remained for me to keep my part and find him a house on the steep and winding section of Lombard Street in San Francisco.

Antonio was very fond of San Francisco, and my wife and I generally made a point of taking him there for dinner when he was in the Bay Area. Naturally, we did not seek out Italian restaurants, but he had a sense that told him when there had been an Italian hand in the preparation of the meal, and he marched off into the kitchen, emerging some minutes later with a Sicilian or a couple of Tuscans and a bottle of Brunello di Montalcino. On one occasion, he found an Italian chef with a German assistant and kept everyone in the car in hysterics, including himself, all the way back to Palo Alto by declaiming loudly in Italian with a heavy German accent various things that the assistant might have said. “Kvanti ziamo a kvesto tavolo?”

Antonio was the little magician who could turn a fantasy into reality and reality into a source of marvelous merriment. But beneath the surface, there was deep and genuine concern for his friends and colleagues, for the field of endeavor he had done so much to bring into being, for Pisa, for Italy, for Europe and the world. Oh, yes, and for the Dolomites. Lombard Street was fantasy, but Cortina d’Ampezo was the center of the world, and Antonio had a house in the mountains nearby in which I believe he was able to feel a peace that he could not find in any other place. That was his Piazza Navona. My wife and I visited him there once and he took us walking among the towering chimneys and along the ledges that make that place unique in the world. When we reached a break in the path that Iris thought she might not be able to cross, Antonio said he would carry her. He was not joking. In this place, he was sure footed and knew exactly what he could do. When the ledge became so narrow that I no longer had the courage to continue, there was no macho urging forward, because he knew that you could not be safe if you did not feel safe. He was a man of the mountains: careful, and professional, and competent.

In 1978, Professor Antonio Zampolli founded what I believe to have been the second department of computational linguistics in the world (after Gothenberg the year before), though he had been leader of the linguistic division of CNUCE since 1968. But his reputation as the father of European computational linguistics goes back to the early seventies when he organized a truly remarkable series of summer schools in Pisa to which many of today’s foremost research centers owe their origins. He scoured the world for anyone with experience in this fledgling field and brought them to pass on what they had learned. Before our very eyes, he turned what had been a

hobby or a passing fantasy for a few people into a discipline and a profession. The hotels and parks and bars and restaurants of Pisa were awash in algorithms, and lexica, and morphemes, and parsing, and semantics. We were born too late to have been with Sartre and Hemingway in Paris, but we were with Zampolli in Pisa when the history of what matters to us was in the making. If the leaning tower has been closed to the public since those days, it is probably because the people who should have been working on keeping it from falling were seduced away from engineering and geology to language and computing.

Antonio was not simply a member of just about every organization that connected computing with the humanities or ordinary language; he was vigorous member and, in many cases, a founding member. The International Committee on Computational Linguistics had frequent cause to be grateful for his innumerable contributions to their work and, most especially, for his bringing the fifth International Conference on Computational Linguistics to Pisa in 1973. This vintage year of the period of the great Pisa summer schools was also the one in which the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing came into being with Antonio as one of its founding members. In 1983, he became president of that organization, a position that he retained for the rest of his life.

I vividly remember an occasion on which Antonio had been assigned by the organizers of a workshop that we both attended to respond to my contribution. To my shame, I allowed his restless activity during my presentation to strengthen the conviction that my efforts were about to receive less than the treatment they deserved. They got what they deserved, and more. With charm and humor and even deference, the weaknesses I had thought might go unnoticed were revealed one by one, and remedies were suggested for errors I had not even suspected. I was put, gently but firmly, where I belonged. From the experience, I learned a lot about myself that I should have learned earlier. But I learned a respect for Antonio Zampolli, which was to grow continually deeper over the years. He gave so much of his life to making good things possible for other people that one was always in danger of forgetting that he was a man of great intellectual power and creativity.

I am able to appreciate, probably better than most, one particularly arcane activity in which Antonio's creativity was manifested, namely that of causing the punched-card machinery that were the precursors of modern computers do things beyond the imagination of their designers. I have this privileged perspective because, at about the same time in the early history of our field, Antonio was working with Padre Busa in Milan, I was working with Margaret Masterman in Cambridge. He was trying to derive a phonemic representation from Italian written texts and I was trying to parse sentences with a formalism now mercifully forgotten. We were both trying to do these things by finding ingenious new ways of wiring the plug boards of various punched-card machines designed to meet the needs of accountants. He succeeded.

I have said that Antonio devoted most of his time and energy to making good things possible for others. In the latter years, he spent much of his time in Brussels and Luxemburg and Washington, not only securing the support of his institute but also tending to health of his discipline and bringing people together in whose potential interactions he saw benefits for a wider community. He was justifiably proud of his achievements as a match-maker, forging collaborations and even life-long friendships among the most unlikely partners. At every Coling conference, he organized a panel on the funding of research in computational linguistics throughout the world, mainly so that young people in our field should be exposed to as many opportunities as possible.

I have tried to limit the flow of anecdotes that flood the mind when one thinks of Antonio because, like no one else that I have known, he enriched the lives of everyone that he touched with unforgettable little personal things. I will end with just one more. After a noisy dinner with much wine and laughter during one of the summer schools, a number of us emerged from a restaurant long after its accustomed closing time into the relative cool of the outside air. Everything was illuminated by the eerie green light of a full moon. Antonio stopped as he came out of the building and suddenly fell quiet and serious. “Everybody follow me”, he said, and set off towards the grassy close that surrounds the cathedral, the baptistery and the tower. Everyone followed in silence. When we arrived, he said, “This place is called Piazza dei Miracoli—The Square of Miracles. I will show you why.” And slowly he walked through the square, following a particular path that he knew well, pointing silently now at a carving on a building, now at a formation of stones in the wall, now at a silhouette on the other side of the square. Nothing was said, but we all understood the reason for the name. One more miracle had occurred there by the little miracle maker of Pisa.

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