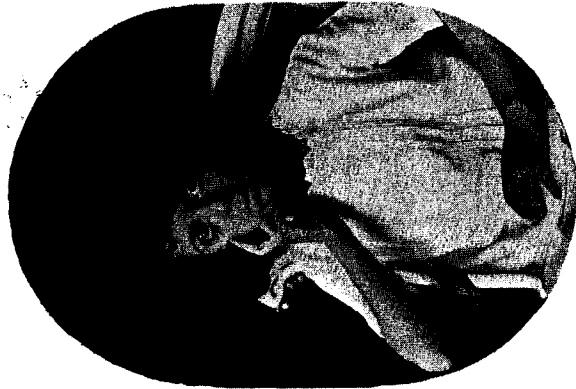
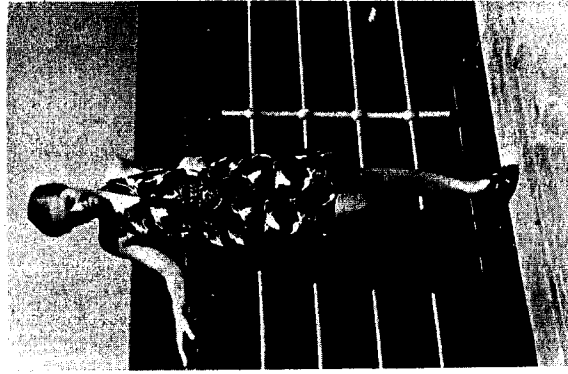


short-lived temper was so explosive that his sisters turned the diminutive of Adam into his nickname: "Damino the Terrible." As a small child, Rita kept careful track of her father's nostrils; when they flared, he was about to lose his terrifying temper.



Rita Levi-Montalcini, eleven years old, 1920



Rita Levi-Montalcini on a boat to the United States, September 1947.



Rita Levi-Montalcini in her laboratory in Rome, 1985.

Despite the histrionics, Rita never questioned her father's love and concern for her welfare. He controlled all the minutiae of her daily life, but she never dreamed of disobeying his orders. When Rita and her fraternal twin Paola modeled new, entrancingly beribboned straw hats, he did not like them. The beautiful bonnets disappeared instantly and were never seen again. Rita's brother Gino wanted to be a sculptor, but his father ordered him to be an engineer. He obeyed and eventually became a famous architect, but he always wished he had been a sculptor.

Timid and submissive, little Rita lived with many fears: her father, monsters in the dark, long hallways, pogroms, and windup toys.

**Start** All the guardian angels who protected Rita's childhood were female: her Aunt Anna, her governess Giovanna, her beautiful mother Adele, and her twin Paola. A gifted painter, Adele Levi was a reserved and submissive wife. When Rita attended an opera with her parents, her father relished the part of the Foundry Owner, who threatened to break the young wife who did not love him. While the crowd roared its approval, Rita silently sympathized with the young wife. "It was not anger," Levi-Montalcini explained. "It was built-in. There was no anger whatsoever. I simply found the situation impossible.... Ever since my childhood, I had strongly resented the different roles played by my father and mother in all family decisions. I adored my mother and rebelled against this difference, which I also feared for myself as a future housewife." In second grade, she said that her fingers were "for sending kisses to mother," but she refused to kiss her father. While Paola shielded herself by communicating with no one, Rita clung to Paola.

When the twins completed fourth grade, Rita longed to continue her academic education. Ignoring her wishes, Adam Levi decreed that his daughters should attend a girls' finishing school and learn to be perfect wives and mothers. His aunts had earned doctoral degrees in literature and mathematics, and he blamed their unhappy marriages on their education.

Levi-Montalcini's years in finishing school were filled with confusion and despair. She learned none of the subjects required for entrance to a university—no mathematics, no exact sciences, no Greek or Latin. Her courses were mindless, and her classmates were interested only in marriage and motherhood. "I had no particular interest in children or in babies, and I never remotely accepted my role as a wife or mother," she recalled. When her beloved nurse Giovanna died of stomach cancer, Rita decided that she wanted to be a doctor. With no hope of attending medical school, she felt trapped and isolated in a dead end without escape. The position of married

women was so debasing that she decided never to marry. She was twenty years old before she had the courage to tell her father the truth: She did not want to marry. Instead, she wanted to become a physician.

When Rita's mother pleaded her cause, Adam Levi reluctantly agreed to hire a tutor to prepare his daughter for university entrance examinations. "If this is really what you want, then I won't stand in your way, even if I'm very doubtful about your choice," he told her. Soon after consenting to Rita's plans, Adam Levi suffered a massive heart attack and died. Over the years, as the memory of her struggles with him faded, she began to worship his memory. By the time she wrote her autobiography in 1988, her beloved mother had become a nameless shadow and her father dominated the book as powerfully as he had ruled her childhood.

Enlisting her cousin Eugenia, Levi-Montalcini hired one tutor for mathematics and science and another tutor for Latin and Greek. She and Eugenia studied philosophy, literature, and history on their own. After only eight months of study, they took the examination. When their tutor called with the results, he announced joyfully, "Signorina Rita, you've both passed!" Levi-Montalcini led the list. She entered the University of Turin's medical school in 1930, determined to prove—to herself and probably to her father also—that she was as intelligent as any man.

In medical school, the three hundred male students spent an inordinate amount of time analyzing the physical charms of the seven female students. Whenever a particularly awkward young woman passed through the halls, the men raised their voices and loudly talked about "Greta Garbo in disguise." In such an atmosphere, Levi-Montalcini wore clothes that were as elegant and asexual as she could manage. As a friend observed, she behaved like a squid, ready to squirt at any young men who approached. She did not argue with them. "I just refused to accept poor treatment. It was like water off the back of a duck," Levi-Montalcini declared. "I wanted to spend all my time on research. I was not receptive to courtship. I dressed like a nun. I despised everything with a feminine flair. Women paid too much for it. I didn't want any sentimental contact with other students, only intellectual contacts. I didn't want any contact as a woman." After years of intellectual deprivation, she could finally be as fanatically devoted to learning as she pleased. She rejected the advances of several young men and told one named Guido, who became her wartime fiancé, that she would stroll with him in Valentino Park "on the condition that we talked only of cultural and musical subjects." ] STOP

Ironically, no sooner had Levi-Montalcini escaped from her father's domination than she fell under the influence of another explosive and autocratic man, Professor Giuseppe Levi. Like Levi-Montalcini's father, the professor was famous for his rages. His tantrums—short-lived though they were—shattered those around him. Like Adam Levi, he controlled even the smallest detail of his family's life. He bellowed "stupid" at his children when they did something he disliked, like wearing city shoes in the mountains or talking with strangers in the train. One of his relatively mild remarks was "I beg your pardon, but you are a perfect imbecile." His sons inherited his anger, but tried to suppress it. At dinner once, one of the sons became so enraged that he grabbed his butter knife and, with silent fury, scraped the skin off the back of his hand. His daughter's description of her childhood, published in the 1950s, reminded Levi-Montalcini of her own upbringing.

Levi was larger than life as a teacher, too. Three of his students—Levi-Montalcini, Salvador Luria, and Renato Dulbecco—emigrated to the United States and won Nobel prizes in physiology. Levi's consuming passion to understand nature was contagious. Although his temper tantrums made Levi-Montalcini tremble with fear, he was different from her father in one vital respect: he liked his students to exercise their intellects. Furthermore, the same spontaneity that made him explode at a student filled him with enthusiasm at a piece of good work. Thanks also to Levi's spontaneity, he always spoke his mind—loudly and passionately—against Fascism. He thundered his disapproval in public buses and lecture halls, in public and in private. His courage was legendary, and his students loved him for it. Levi's passion for science well done, his disdain for shoddiness, and his tumultuous approach to life's dramas formed the backdrop for Levi-Montalcini's development as a scientist.

Above all, Levi was a magnificent histologist, skilled in the microscopic study of tissue structure. He made Levi-Montalcini expert in a new technique, staining embryonic chick neurons with chrome silver to make the nerve cells stand out in smallest detail. It was an elegant but simple method, and she used it later in her secret wartime lab. For her thesis, Levi-Montalcini studied collagen reticular fibers, which are the web-like supporting fibers in different types of tissue. Soon she did not know whether she wanted to pursue research or to practice medicine.

After completing medical school in 1936, Levi-Montalcini worked with Levi for two more years, specializing in neurology and psychiatry. She was still torn between research and clinical practice. Then Benito Mussolini made the decision for her. In June, 1938, Il