



RITA LEVI MONTALCINI



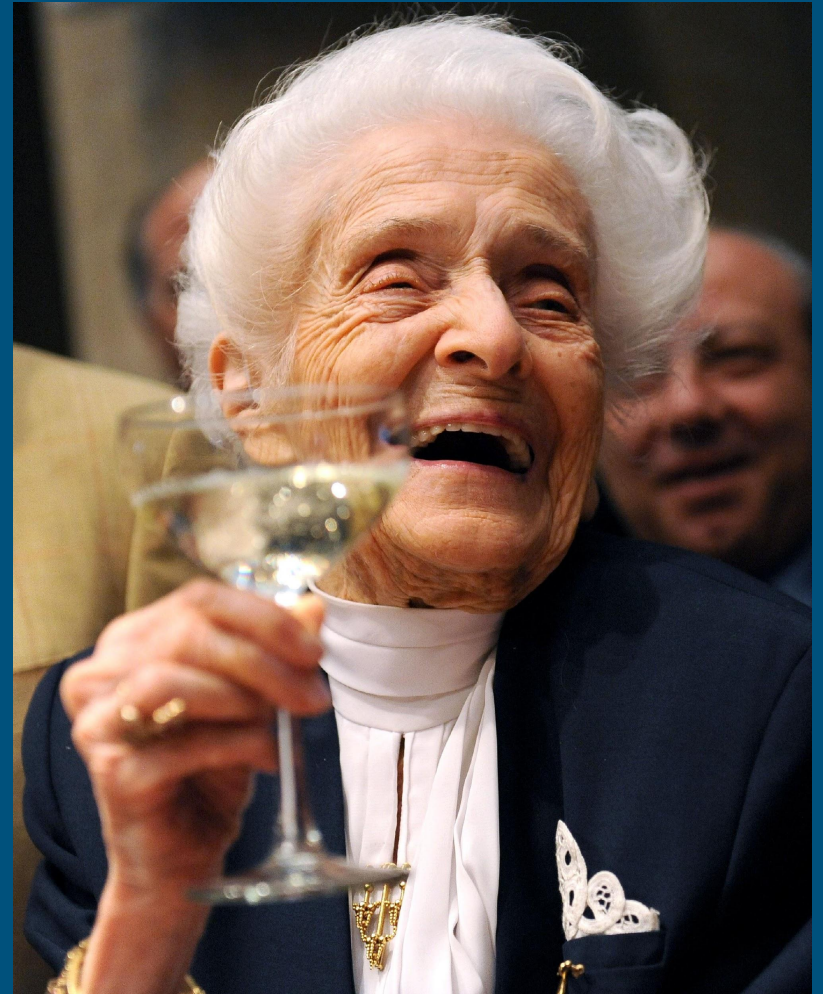
An Important Italian Scientist

by Thomas Pezzano and Luca Pastorello



RITA LEVI-MONTALCINI

Rita Levi-Montalcini (22 April 1909 – 30 December 2012) was an Italian Nobel laureate, honored for her work in neurobiology. She was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Physiology for the discovery of nerve growth factor. From 2001 until her death, she also served in the Italian Senate as a Senator for Life. At the time of her death, she was the oldest living Nobel laureate.



EDUCATION

Levi-Montalcini was born on 22 April 1909 in Turin, to a Sephardic Jewish family. In her teenage years, she considered becoming a writer but after seeing a close family friend die of stomach cancer she decided to attend the University of Turin Medical School. Her academic career was cut short by Benito Mussolini's 1938 Manifesto of Race.



CAREER

During World War II she set up a laboratory in her bedroom but when the Germans invaded Italy in 1943, her family fled south to Florence, where they survived the Holocaust, under false identities. In her hiding place, she set up a laboratory and in September 1946, Rita Levi-Montalcini continues her research in the laboratory of Viktor Hamburger at Washington University. She was made a full professor in 1958. From 1961 to 1969, she directed the Research Center of Neurobiology in Rome, and from 1969 to 1978, the Laboratory of Cellular Biology. Levi-Montalcini founded the European Brain Research Institute in 2002, and then served as its president.



RESEARCH

In 1952, she did her most important work: isolating nerve growth factor (NGF) from observations of certain cancerous tissues that cause extremely rapid growth of nerve cells. By transferring pieces of tumors to chick embryos, Montalcini established a mass of cells that was full of nerve fibers. The discovery of nerves growing everywhere was surprising. This suggested to Montalcini that the tumor itself was releasing a substance that was stimulating the growth of nerves.

