

# Italy

Valentina Perosa interviewed **Elisa Montessori**

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**Perosa:** My name is Valentina Perosa and I am actually a doctor and researcher specialising in neurology, but today I find myself in the role of amateur journalist in order to interview Signora Elisa Montessori.

**Montessori:** Hello, good evening. My name is Elisa Montessori but call me Elisa Maria. I was born in Genoa on 18 June 1931, and am therefore eighty-eight years old—and in a few days, when the year 2020 starts, I'll be going on eighty-nine. So I am very old. I was born in Genoa but stayed there only a few years. However, I remember everything, I have a very strong visual memory. We lived in Sampierdarena, which is near Genoa, and I remember many things about the sea. I think this is, and remains, very important for all of a person's life: I mean the place where you were born. For example, the relationship we have with nature is determined by the first images we perceive around us. The sea in Genoa is an urban sea, not a summer sea associated with vacation; it is always with us. And the sea is in the character of the Genoese. It is an acrid character, because in front of you is the dangerous sea and behind you the mountains.

**Perosa:** Did this peril posed by the sea influence you?

**Montessori:** Yes, I always considered the sea inhospitable. I don't enter the water easily, I am not an aquatic person.

**Perosa:** Is Genoa home for you?

**Montessori:** I have very strong memories of Genoa. I greatly remember, for example, strangely enough, the Genoese dialect and the walks that my father and mother would make me take on Sundays. My father worked in a factory and my mother was a housewife. Then my brother was born who is three years younger than me. They always took us to one part of Nervi [east of Genoa] and in Pegli to the other side [west of Genoa], and these places were much more open and free in the sense that there were the seafronts there. Whereas when I went to the sea in Genoa, I often went with my Dad, and the houses at the time were practically along the shore and there were few cabins. The sand was dark; it wasn't the typical summer sand, with beach umbrellas. I have a memory of water splashing and my putting little boats into the sea and watching them go out and return. I still feel intensely the odour of the sea, an odour tied strongly to the saltiness and the wind.

**Perosa:** So you didn't always feel safe in Genoa?

**Montessori:** Safe in the sense of the family, yes. For three years I was very happy because I knew that my mother had had a baby before me who had not survived, and therefore I was the second child but alive and also very autonomous and very lively. I had a very affectionate family and a very caring one. Then my brother was born and I was overcome by a frightful jealousy. I felt a tremendous sense of injustice and I even tried to kill my brother [*laughs*].

Fortunately my parents didn't realise this. Naturally my brother was the masculine one and had blue eyes. He was completely different from me and I remained the naughty child all my life [*laughs*], the one who is disrespectful, who is very good in school but who, when she doesn't want to do something, doesn't do it. The one who never cries whatever punishment is meted out and pretends not to suffer—that is, the most stubborn one.

**Perosa:** Did you maintain this role later on?

**Montessori:** Always. My brother, on the other hand, was the good boy, sweet, intelligent, who managed to do things with ease. When he was older he recited poetry—I have never recited a poem. I saw him ten days ago and we argued again [*laughs*].

I like him very much but I consider him a person very different than me. Meanwhile there was a divide, obviously not noticeable at that age but quite early on. There was a division in the family because they were all very Catholic, and as early as my first year of middle school, when one had to go church, I always refused. This was a factor in the estrangement.

**Perosa:** This was something very important that I wanted to discuss: religion.

**Montessori:** They didn't insist. I did not go to Mass.

**Perosa:** So your family was Catholic, like the majority of Italian families.

**Montessori:** Let's say even a little more.

**Perosa:** And what estranged you from religion, which aspects?

**Montessori:** What estranged me was everything that they wanted and were obliged to teach me, and everything to do with the ceremonial imposed at the time. For one, let's not forget one very important thing: I did not attend the first year of primary school because I had already taught myself to read and write with the help of my dad. I did my second year of elementary school in Genoa and the first thing they taught us was "*Viva il Duce*" ["Long live *il Duce*," i.e., Mussolini]. We were in fact in that period where fascism was most flaunted—and then there was prayer. Therefore you could not infringe on this authority in any way. I evidently had a critical and rebellious character.

I ask myself why, why somebody had to impose this on me. I had a hard time, and sometimes I didn't talk about these things. Sometimes I whispered because I felt these were impositions that I didn't manage to understand.

**Perosa:** Therefore religion for you was a second obligation: after politics came religion.

**Montessori:** Yes, they forced me to do my first communion and after that enough, we didn't discuss it any further and they didn't even try.

After that we moved from Genoa and went to live in a small town called Stazzano, near Serravalle in the province of Alessandria. In fact my father changed jobs; first he was at Eridania [a sugar manufacturer], and then in a distillery. My dad was a great worker. Now the family situation had changed. In the third year of elementary school my head opened up because I had a very intelligent teacher. Very ugly, but she understood that I had some strange things about me, so she treated me in a different way than she did the other students. For example, I had become very good at doing things the others couldn't manage to do.

**Perosa:** To draw or to write?

**Montessori:** To draw quite well, but, for example, I managed to read all the blank geographical maps. When there was writing involved I was immediately very attentive. For example: "Write about the noises you hear." I remember that I wrote page after page, while the others didn't hear anything. I heard the sounds inside my body as well as outside and I made them connect. This amused me greatly, and these were things the others didn't do because there wasn't this connection.

**Perosa:** And the teacher understood this and it struck a chord with her?

**Montessori:** When I left it was the first time that I saw an adult cry. However, that year something tremendous happened: my little sister was born. My younger sister was unfortunately handicapped, and this was a big shock for me. In fact, I realised immediately that this child was not normal. She had a very small head. It was a pivotal event in my life. It was an axis of imbalance in the family. I practically didn't exist anymore, because I was the one who in one way or the other would get by. All the pride was directed towards my brother, and the protection and sustenance were aimed at this poor sister. My brother succumbed to a kind of indifference, while I confess that I was very ashamed of my sister. I was not only pitiless but, at the same time, I felt shame.

**Perosa:** Why did you feel shame? Do you think that the political situation at that time influenced you in feeling ashamed? Perhaps today your attitude would have been different?

**Montessori:** It wasn't so much the politics in general but the fact that the pain in the family was kept inside and hidden. My mother was an intelligent woman and, to the

extent that it was possible, she tried to further my sister's development. She sent her to school and she learned to read and write, that is, the fundamentals. However, my attitude was one of refusal and intolerance; I wasn't disposed to pity and unconditional love. It was very difficult, because naturally I felt guilt.

**Perosa:** Certainly. And then your sister survived several years. Did she grow up with you?

**Montessori:** Yes, she grew up with me, in fact I was well over forty when she died. The strange thing is that when she became ill with a very severe case of leukaemia it was I who took care of her and was there with her when she was dying. Me. Because she wanted me and I understood that I really could do it. It was a sort of challenge. I already had two children. I was a woman who had had her share of grief. The situation was very different from before. I am telling you this because I was in analysis and no one had ever articulated this trauma as it was too deep to be analysed. There was a real laceration from when I was little.

**Perosa:** Certainly. Perhaps also paradoxically, the fact that you cared for her and were close was a kind of absolution.

**Montessori:** Yes, a sort of penance. As a young person I was impotent but I gave her something afterwards. And in fact it was like this up to the end.

**Perosa:** You mentioned your teacher, do you remember her name?

**Montessori:** No.

**Perosa:** But one could say that she was one of the most important role models for you during your education?

**Montessori:** Yes, she was. I liked good-looking people, which she wasn't, but she was a person who in some way I felt a connection with. The strange thing is that in my family I received a lot of affection but never felt a real sense of connection. I always felt—and the others felt the same about me—that I was different. I never followed their example.

**Perosa:** Starting with religion?

**Montessori:** That and all the rest.

**Perosa:** You said a little while ago that at school the first thing you did in the morning was salute the *Duce* and then say a prayer. You also said that your family, like all families at the time, sought to keep their problems private and “wash their dirty laundry at home,” as we say in Italian. And how did they relate to politics, how did you experience the period of fascism as a child and schoolgirl?

**Montessori:** I experienced it in a, I would say, very privileged manner because I had a person who was very present in my life, and this was my maternal grandfather. His

name was—and you can look it up on Wikipedia—Meuccio Ruini, and he was one of the founding fathers and authors of the constitution. He was a political person who entered politics very young. During the period of Fascism he was one of the very few who did not take the party membership card and we were thus self-declared anti-fascists. My father had had to take this famous party card, otherwise he would have had no work and thus nothing to eat. These two families, Montessori and Ruini, were very different. My grandmother [on the Montessori side] was a very rich woman, more than just well off, with a husband who was a socialist lawyer and who practically squandered his wife's entire fortune. It was customary that the wife could say nothing. With marriage the assets all passed to the husband. The Ruinis, on the other hand, were a different family because they were intellectuals. My grandfather was Giolitti's<sup>1</sup> secretary and immediately became very important. Then during the fascist era they forbade my grandfather from performing any kind of work because he did not have the party card. Let's say that he was confined at home. I was his favourite grandchild because he said that I was strange for those times. And so I was very fortunate to have this grandfather. We often came to Rome; he evidently had a lot of free time. To make ends meet he wrote theses, signing them with other names. Some of his writings have been published. In his free time he took me to see all the museums, the churches, the cinemas. As a little girl I saw all kinds of films with my grandfather that might not have been appropriate for me; they were called *lirici* because they cost one lira. Also later my grandfather was very important.

**Perosa:** Did you have to leave your house to avoid political persecution because of him?

**Montessori:** Yes, but that was later. First I completed my fourth year of primary school in my grandfather's house, because my father at the time had a job that wasn't stable, in the south. Then we all went to the south. It now seems ridiculous to say these things, but it felt like being in Africa. At the time however there was a huge divide [between north and south]. We lived in Lecce, where I attended my first and second year of middle school. It was very important because it was there that I realised that I could draw. At that time, in middle school, there was one hour of drawing.

I have this recollection: they took us to draw from real life—the branches of a peach tree, the trees in flower—and they gave us the usual Fabriano paper and a pencil. Afterwards we took them to the teacher's desk and I saw that all the other drawings were different than mine, and mine were different than the others. But why? And I had a real revelation: they all drew what they knew, but I drew what I saw.

**Perosa:** Also what you felt, perhaps?

**Montessori:** No, no, what I saw. It was exactly the opposite. That is, seeing is not something that children are taught. Because when they say to a child, “Draw a flower”—in fact with my children I tried to do this—they draw a flower, but if you make them see a flower they don’t understand what they have to do. Many people, also adults, don’t know how to do it because they don’t have a sense of space. Space derives from the outlines of the leaf, and you have to frame your drawing in an outline, not completely or what you know, but the outline of the leaf. That is, you understand that a thing is different from the real thing but it has to mirror the rules of reality.

**Perosa:** Certainly, and in that moment was it clear to you that you drew in a different manner?

**Montessori:** For me it was easy.

**Perosa:** For you it was easy, while for the others it cost them more effort.

**Montessori:** Not only more effort—it was completely different. It was a method of expressing what they knew. Even today, if you get a child to draw and tell him, “Draw me a car,” he will draw the car from memory; he won’t draw a wheel in the way you can see it.

**Perosa:** He doesn’t look at the car again in order to draw it. So this was another crucial moment in your development. And was there anyone in this period who guided you. For example your grandfather, or another teacher who encouraged you?

**Montessori:** Yes, maybe yes. But it wasn’t very important. The most important thing that happened in those years was that the Montessoris went from Reggio to Parma. First we went to the mountains, then we spent a week by the sea in the house of relatives, and then we went to the countryside between Reggio and Parma. In the countryside we didn’t have our own house, it was the house of our grandparents and uncles. The 8th of September divided Italy. And so it happened that my father remained in the south, and the family, that is my mother, my sister, my brother and I, we remained in the house of our grandparents. The winter started and I had to attend my third year of middle school, that is the year which is supposed to prepare you for secondary school. I didn’t study at all, I didn’t do anything. I was really a rebellious girl, I always went around with a German shepherd dog—I even took him to school. I told the others we ought to be on strike, ridiculous things. I passed however because I was Ruini’s granddaughter, and you couldn’t flunk Ruini’s granddaughter.

Then, afterwards, after this school year which had gone badly, my cousin arrived from Florence. He was a very cute boy with whom I was secretly head over heels in love. His family told us that we, as relatives of a very important figure in the Roman resistance

who could not be found, were in danger. My grandfather always went with all the others, with [Ivanoe] Bonomi, [Palmiro] Togliatti—they had to be constantly on the move, otherwise they would have been captured and killed. Now, however, the imminent threat was that their relatives would be found and sent to a concentration camp. So within a week my uncles and aunts went to Florence and we went with our mother by ourselves to a house in the Tuscan-Emilian Appenines, north of Canossa. It was a house without electricity, without water, without food, and without money.

**Perosa:** And without dad, because dad had remained in the south.

**Montessori:** We were alone.

**Perosa:** And were you aware at that moment of everything that was happening? Did you realise that the fascists were persecuting you?

**Montessori:** Yes, yes. The fascists were the enemy. Obviously there were also the Germans. Even today when I hear German spoken I become tense. When I hear German spoken I am frightened.

It so happened, in this house where there was really nothing apart from the frightful cold and hunger, that my mother lost it because she wasn't used to this. My maternal grandmother was a very special woman—but not in any practical way; she hardly knew how to heat a glass of milk. And then there was my brother who was lazy and didn't understand anything. And my sister, poor thing, given how she was, what could she do? It was I who went to the well to fetch water, who washed the dishes with sand and who stole. I stole eggs and chestnuts but never managed to steal chickens.

**Perosa:** So a life of plain survival at that time.

**Montessori:** Still, I was never happier in all my life.

**Perosa:** Seriously?

**Montessori:** Yes.

**Perosa:** Why?

**Montessori:** Because I was free.

**Perosa:** You were free. And this for you was liberty?

**Montessori:** It could have been liberty. Everyone was frightened, everyone was scared to die. If you ask me what has been the most important thing in my life, then unfortunately, if I'm going to be sincere, I can say neither motherhood nor love. It was the war. Many people want to deny this condition of poverty. I saw that afterwards people didn't want to remember how much they had suffered.

**Perosa:** Is it possible that this condition of poverty brought you back to the essentials, to real things?

**Montessori:** This was very significant for me because I have had to face some very dramatic losses in my life and my first instinct has always been to ask what are we going to eat tomorrow, what do we need to do tomorrow, and what is really necessary to survive? Because survival was the sign; the pain would remain forever, but one always needs to remember that survival is the most important thing, and I did not notice this much in other people. In that scary year I didn't attend school, but I had the incredible luck to know a displaced woman who lived quite close by, a two-hour walk. In the snow the two hours could become even longer. She had brought with her all the books she owned. She used an acetylene lamp made of two bowls, one with stones and the other with water, which, drop by drop, produced a bluish gas that gave off light. With the help of this acetylene lamp I read all the Russians, I read everything that one could read. My mother let me read because I had to go to bed after a glass of milk and some chestnuts—it wasn't exactly fun.

But I read and I read everything. And I was also lucky that she had quite a few contemporary and modern books. This lady wasn't exactly an intellectual, she was a teacher, but she had a wonderful library. I read everything I could get my hands on, going a step up in quality. For example, first I would read what my mother was reading, those books published by Medusa. Not exactly sentimental romances, as my mother was an intelligent woman, but family stories. The Forsyte Saga, etc., those kinds of books. I on the other hand went up one level. Dostoyevsky, Gorky, Tolstoy. That is, I read all the most beautiful books on earth.

**Perosa:** So you also had free time, paradoxically, in that situation?

**Montessori:** Of course, I didn't study!

**Perosa:** Though I suppose you couldn't study.

**Montessori:** Of course I couldn't study. My brother studied something with a priest but I needed to study Greek and Latin and there was no one who knew about that—these were people, where we were staying, who couldn't read or write. This was the situation in the deep north which you don't know about if you haven't been there. It's worse than the deep south, it's worse because they don't talk about it. There's a huge amount of ignorance and pettiness, quite incredible. Then there were material difficulties which aren't to be underestimated. But then this period finished with the liberation.

**Perosa:** So, how long did you stay there [in the Apennines]?

**Montessori:** A year and a half. However, I am telling you: an incredible happiness, because nobody could tell me anything. I would say: "There's nothing to eat?" "No."

“Okay, see you,” and I would go off for hours. It was a bit like in a film, but it happened to me. With bare feet I would wander around collecting chestnuts. After all, there was also a kind of pride. Thus, the war ended and my grandfather and dad arrived in a car. Here occurred another scene out of a film as everyone embraced and cried and I shook my dad’s hand.

**Perosa:** Weren’t you happy to see him?

**Montessori:** I was very angry.

**Perosa:** Because he had remained far away?

**Montessori:** I was very angry with both him and my grandfather. It was then that I understood that power is the worst disgrace that exists in the world. It’s true that my grandfather, as an anti-fascist, suffered the tremendous cruelty of not being able to work. It’s true that my father had had to endure very stressful work as well as humiliations, but we had risked our lives and they had not had the courage to join us because it was too dangerous. We were the first not to have been killed in a roundup and our house was the first not to be burnt. My grandmother always said, “The Germans are coming.” I was already big and had started having my period, I was a girl. And she always called me “Lisetta” — because this is how she called me “If they attack you remember one thing: Rape is horrendous but life is more important.” Because they raped all the girls, but luckily it didn’t happen to me.

**Perosa:** One can really speak of luck in that case.

**Montessori:** Yes, only luck, only luck. I saw people die near me, I saw the bombardments, I saw the roundups, I saw the fires, I saw death, I saw how terrified the adults were.

**Perosa:** Which is perhaps the most disturbing thing for a child.

**Montessori:** In one respect I was very sure of myself. I never really thought that someone could do me real harm or kill me. I didn’t have that fear.

**Perosa:** We should also mention how you were prepared by your relatives for whatever awful thing might happen. Your grandmother talked to you very openly.

**Montessori:** She did, yes, but not my mother. Still, I found great consolation in the pleasure of reading, for example. It’s not that I didn’t understand anything in school! I went to school to learn things and to give rote answers. But even in third grade, where there was a gleam of intelligence, I didn’t learn anything.

**Perosa:** So at home, even though they spoke about the role your grandfather and your father were playing, it was clear what was happening, it was clear that they were being looked for, that they wanted to kill them or deport them.

**Montessori:** Above all my grandfather; my father less so because my father wasn't as prominent and had a job in a distillery and at different oil mills. Dante Oil, Costa, he worked for them. Instead, for my grandfather, it was a political struggle. It was there that the first nucleus of a government was formed; my grandfather was the first minister of reconstruction. However, my grandfather had a poor person's pride. We always lived a modest life. We ate soups made of Liebig cubes—that is, the bare minimum. He had a house full of books bought secondhand. Also he was a man totally immune from taking advantage of his privileged position, he absolutely did not touch his money.

**Perosa:** But the political idea, power, interested him more.

**Montessori:** Power. But not economic power, in fact he greatly despised anyone who took advantage of it. He was a very strange man.

**Perosa:** But honest.

**Montessori:** Yes, in an exaggerated way. Several times he received a prize for being the worst dressed parliamentarian [*laughs*]. He was very strange.

**Perosa:** He had other priorities. Tell me one thing. I have two questions, in my opinion crucial from today's point of view: this idea of borders which divided families in that period, how do you see it now? For example, how do you now view the borders inside Europe?

**Montessori:** My grandfather was a staunch Europeanist. I left secondary school because I could no longer live with my parents due to profound disagreements, really it was very sad at home, and so my grandfather said: this one, the only intelligent one in the house, I'll take her but she has to go to university. In my generation I had to be the only one with a degree, it wasn't so obvious at the time. Women had to know how to do many things. The richer ones maybe went to a Swiss college to learn languages and how to comport themselves. There was another girl who graduated, my cousin who studied medicine. I studied humanities and even history.

**Perosa:** And where?

**Montessori:** In Rome with my grandfather. I stayed with my grandfather for five years without speaking to him.

**Perosa:** In what way without speaking?

**Montessori:** Very little.

**Perosa:** Because you were still angry?

**Montessori:** No, to protect myself. I have never talked to others about my affairs because I never trusted anyone, I understood that other people talked about things that I could not agree with. And my grandfather was a staunch Europeanist and with the little

I knew about history I told myself it seemed a utopia. History teaches us that all the people who tried to unify Europe failed miserably. They met bad ends, Napoleon etc., all of them. Including the Roman Empire, whoever wanted to unify it. It was a grand idea, Europe. Obviously, my grandfather went nuts because he was a friend of Adenauer. He told me, "It's better that you stay quiet, you don't understand anything about these things" [*laughs*]. I didn't travel, I only went to my father, my mother, my grandfather, back and forth. Or I went to Venice to see the Biennale. This was my big present when I graduated. For my thesis in history I even wrote about the concept of nationality, without understanding anything.

**Perosa:** You didn't feel this to be your subject?

**Montessori:** No, it didn't interest me at all. There was this old professor, Professor Silva, who died and was replaced by another one, and I had to do my thesis in a couple of months. At home they said to me: "You know how to draw, you can do whatever you want, but you have to make yourself independent." Nobody could have thought that I could get by by selling a painting.

Returning to the subject of Europe, I was very sceptical. My big stroke of luck after graduation was meeting Mario Tchou, who was married to a sort of cousin. My maternal grandmother had had two husbands. With the first one she had a daughter, Mariangela, who had been married to Mario Tchou. I was very close to this aunt and I met Mario when I was sixteen years old, very young. It was a stroke of lightning. He had just married and I was a little girl. Then circumstances separated us. I had my life in Rome and I also led a reckless life. At the time girls never went to bed with men. To bed? There was never a bed, it was a way of saying things. People did not have complete sexual relations, it was something forbidden. Because of religion, out of good sense and the horror of becoming pregnant. This was the principal danger in the lives of girls. Instead I had my first lover at the age of eighteen, nineteen. It was Mirko Basaldella, who was an acclaimed sculptor and a little gay. It was quite weird, him married to an unpleasant woman and the whole thing top secret, even today . . . I can tell you now because he has been dead for some time and I am about to die so I can tell you everything. After that I had other lovers.

**Perosa:** A modern woman.

**Montessori:** Well yes, I went everywhere. I went out in the evenings, hiding from my grandfather, who knew and didn't know. He didn't really much care. I had my strategies, which I have never revealed to my children.

**Perosa:** Now you can tell them.

**Montessori:** Now they are sixty years old. But they had other methods; they did it without hiding. In any case, my life has been somewhat adventurous and lively and this

gave me, in one respect, self-confidence, but in another a lot of fragility, because I never had a real foothold. The only thing was drawing and work, that yes. I had my first exhibition at the age of twenty.

**Perosa:** Very young.

**Montessori:** Yes, young because at the time there were very few women painters.

**Perosa:** And you also learned a lot from this Mirko?

**Montessori:** There were these architects who were friends of my grandfather, Amedeo especially but also Ugo, who took it upon themselves to protect this girl. I dressed in a different way, I always wore pants and a black sweater—I had read Sartre—I didn't use make-up, had very short hair. They would take me to artists' studios. I always earned a lot of respect. I never had to protect myself from being pinched in the bottom. They used to say that women who worked were always considered prostitutes. It wasn't one bit true! I was always treated with respect. And all of them were very miffed because if they let me see what they were doing then after five minutes, like a great cook, I would copy them. I learned quickly because my grandfather didn't send me to the academy.

**Perosa:** He didn't want to send you to the academy?

**Montessori:** No, because he said stupid people go to the academy.

**Perosa:** So, first you had to finish your degree in humanities and history.

**Montessori:** I had excellent teachers. Now nobody remembers them anymore. To get your masters and study humanities then was difficult, you needed to study. And I studied in the summer for a month or two. Later I met Mario. He returned to Italy because he had been recalled by Olivetti, and his wife Mariangela left him abruptly. She fell in love with her mother's doctor, Marcello Perez, a handsome man of the world. Meanwhile Mario had suffered a lot in America, he was a scientist and led a very difficult and tiring life. And in Rome, you know, everything was different. In any case they left each other. In the family there was dismay. When Mario came to greet my grandfather, I opened the door for him. I had finished, I had won a scholarship from Lionello Venturi, who was a very important critic at the time, because I had started off really well with painting, with much enthusiasm, but I wasn't highly regarded because I didn't belong to any group. That didn't go down well at the time but I had talent, I wasn't exactly a nobody. Mario then said to me, I'm coming to see you. He came once, twice, three times, and we got on very well together. And so why aren't we together? Let's be together! Let's get married and not tell anyone. And I got married without telling anybody.

**Perosa:** Seriously? So, no ceremony.

**Montessori:** The ceremony was at the Chinese embassy with my Chinese family.

**Perosa:** But without your parents.

**Montessori:** We went to visit them later. We were living in Pisa because the first calculator was in Pisa.

**Perosa:** Which Mario helped to develop.

**Montessori:** Yes he did. Mario was a genius, a scientist, a genius. We remained there for two years, which were two very strange years for me. In one respect there was much happiness because I was with him. I have been with Mario all my life, even now, because he gave me something incredibly profound and indelible. I mean understanding each other without effort. He understood. This complicity, which goes beyond a relationship of desire, of love or passion. It's a thing that many others have not experienced, unfortunately.

**Perosa:** Can one talk of symbiosis?

**Montessori:** No, because we were completely different. I don't understand anything about mathematics—nothing, not even a little.

**Perosa:** Completely different.

**Montessori:** Yes, two different worlds. He loved me and used to say that I was the most improbable person he had ever met. Because like now, us talking, you see, I can't hold up a linear and logical discourse. That's how my brain works, I can't change.

**Perosa:** In an associative manner.

**Montessori:** In an associative manner. I am made like this, there's nothing I can do. It's the opposite of a computer. I was saying improbable because when he would say something to me, I would reply, but I would reply in another sense. This he liked very much, because obviously I gave him something that he lacked. Meanwhile liberty and the joy of living, of which he had tasted little, because he had studied too much. And then, regarding Europe, we started travelling.

**Perosa:** So the first time you left Italy was with him?

**Montessori:** Yes, with him. Initially I should have gone to France on a scholarship but I gave it up in order to get married. It was a strange choice because one can in fact see this from two points of view: one is from a point of view of normality, that is, of a woman who wants to marry, have children, etc. An artist, however, was only considered as such if he became a personality. And I always refused because, as you see me now, I am not a personality. I don't want to talk to you in four languages or pretend I have ten secretaries. All the things that turn a woman into a personality, I refused from the start. I have seen too many artists who dedicated themselves to their work and saw in their

own work a fulfilling existence. What is more important for me: my life or my work? My life. And in my life I want to experience things. I want to try to be close to a man, I want to try to have children. To try, because my body is the most important thing that there is.

**Perosa:** To give up something that others might see as a grand opportunity takes courage.

**Montessori:** The world is full of these artist's wives. You know that there is now an effort to rehabilitate these old ladies.

**Perosa:** In what sense "an effort to rehabilitate these old ladies"?

**Montessori:** They have come to realise that all these artists, writers, painters, sculptors had terrific wives that lived in their shadow. These gentlemen became famous in an egocentric manner, dedicated to drugs and alcohol, the more the merrier, because becoming famous is arduous. Almost always self-destructive. The bourgeoisie loves myth. If you don't belong in the category of myth, that's no good, because then they can't adore you.

**Perosa:** Normality is no good?

**Montessori:** Normality is only for the superstars. The superstars can get there. There is no rule, but generally the path is that of life. For me, with Mario, marrying a man of another "race"—well, at the time that was strange, very strange.

**Perosa:** So that was the first boundary you crossed.

**Montessori:** But I didn't cross it, it wasn't there. The curious thing is that it was never there. I never felt it, I knew full well that there were differences, but I never noticed a difference that alienated me. Quite the opposite, it drew me closer.

**Perosa:** So with him you also crossed your first geographical boundaries.

**Montessori:** Yes, France, England. Mario had a very elite position, and so I went from a regimen of, I won't say poverty, but extreme frugality, to grand hotels, etc. He had been very poor and it gave him pleasure to offer me these pleasantries. And then, look, with my grandfather I got to learn the big difference between Having and Power. First anti-fascism and absolute misery, then a ministerial car. I used to go to state ceremonies, to the most significant places, receptions. Once I went without socks, what a thing [*laughs*], or with sandals. I didn't know a thing. And my grandfather didn't care one bit. "Are you dressed? Are you decent"? I didn't have this bourgeois attitude, even though I knew that I had a different role in life. Entering a luxurious hotel with Mario did not impress me. I liked it, I enjoyed myself.

You are a little more up, I think, on this story of Europe.

**Perosa:** I am simply interested in knowing how one perceived Europe at that time, after the war.

**Montessori:** It was a big mirage. The first time that De Gasperi went to America after the war—this is not a fake story—he didn't even have a coat. He went to see [Cesare] Merzagora, who was richer, and borrowed his coat. We Italians went to America as poor people. When we returned to Rome after the war in my grandfather's ministerial car, the Americans stopped us. We owned some bundles with rags inside, all we had left. The Americans made us open them and started laughing because we actually had socks with holes in them and other really miserable things. Very humiliating, and there I realised that they were not liberators but rather those who had won. For me that meant diffidence, politically as well. My grandfather had said to me when I was with him: "Look, you, if you want you can become a woman politician. Let me tell you right away, you have two options, either extreme right or extreme left. Because the women who want to be in the centre have to be so strong professionally, which you are not." "But I will never go into politics," [I told him]. I never believed in it.

**Perosa:** In the idea of a united Europe?

**Montessori:** No, with my second husband I saw from too close up how power was handled, first by the Christian Democrats and then by the Communists. Mario on the other hand was on the liberal left, but as he was a scientist he wasn't politically involved. He never had a party card, while my second husband Nino was a committed Communist and wanted to convince everyone else. Let's not talk about the level of civility you find in a person such as Mario in comparison to Nino. It wasn't based on politics but rather was based on education. It's easier to get on with a person who is really intelligent and educated and holds political opinions that are the opposite of yours than with a person who shares your politics but is more rough and more emotional.

**Perosa:** I would sign that statement immediately.

**Montessori:** Then I had my first child, Nicola. It was something much desired and unexpected because I didn't realise that one has to suffer so much for a daughter. The birth was something horrendous! The first thing I said to my mother was, "You said that motherhood was such a magnificent thing—how come? It's something horrendous!" An experience of dismemberment.

**Perosa:** And at the time they didn't give you painkillers when giving birth.

**Montessori:** Yes, there was nothing. And then my mother said, "My biggest joy was taking this child into my arms." Nicola, when she was born, was very beautiful. I was happy but also preoccupied because I didn't feel very maternal and I didn't understand

anything. Above all I always lived with my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law was an extraordinary woman. Speaking of boundaries, think of a girl who lived like this with a Chinese lady. She wasn't traditional as she was the first in her family not to have had her feet bound. The first to have been sent out of China by her father, out from one of the hundred Chinese aristocratic families. He sent her to England, and in fact she knew English really well. And she was one of the first suffragettes. She had an arranged marriage, without seeing her husband first. She was a very aristocratic woman, small, who, in her most affectionate moment, said to me: "You are my third daughter, you are the most Chinese."

Because for her—and they were really racist—Europe was something laughable. To say that for her I was Chinese was to say I was equal to them, so it was the biggest compliment she could give me. When I was left alone after Mario died on 9 November 1961—I was thirty years old and Mario thirty-seven—Donata was six months old and Nicola three years. I found myself alone in a very complicated situation, very difficult. My dad always said, "Come back to us in Emilia, that way we'll be together." But at the time, to go back to Emilia with two Chinese children was not easy.

**Perosa:** You were living in Milan at that time.

**Montessori:** Yes, in a beautiful house designed by Ettore Sottsass: the absolute tops at that time after the war.

**Perosa:** And the city was more open compared to Emilia.

**Montessori:** Yes, but I didn't want to stay in Milan. After a while I realised that there I was the widow Tchou.

**Perosa:** You didn't manage to reinvent yourself as an autonomous person?

**Montessori:** No. At that time it was different. Now there are many single women, but back then it was complicated. I had to sever all my bonds yet again. I left that house — they told me I was mad because it was a beautiful house, but I didn't care. The furniture is pieces of wood, I am more important than that. I took the children and returned to Rome alone in a rented house. I said to myself, "I am returning to Rome because there I have the family of my grandfather and my Chinese family. These children need to have roots." Everyone told me, "You are fantastic, send the children to a Swiss boarding school and concentrate on work, go to America"—I was very rich at the time. I said, "But you are all mad, I want to see my children grow up. If I send them to boarding school I will not see them again." I had the option of making them become rich but I had a big fear of wealth. Only a few children of rich people manage to save themselves, only a few. Or they become stupid or good-for-nothing or drug addicts or they die in terrible

accidents. I was almost down and started from scratch. I rented a modest house in Prati [a neighbourhood in Rome]. The children went to a local primary school and were with me. I found a Sardinian woman who helped me and this was my salvation.

**Perosa:** A single mother in the sixties. Even now it's difficult to be a single mother, imagine then.

**Montessori:** Yes, but at least I didn't have to go to the office.

**Perosa:** You had a certain flexibility.

**Montessori:** In my bedroom I had a beautiful drawing table and in the evening I drew. In Rome there were thousands of exhibitions, I wasn't unhappy. Certainly it was a difficult life from the point of view of loneliness because I really missed Mario. It was very hard, but I saw my children grow up and I loved them. I was also in analysis, because at a certain point in my life I had had a very serious psychological breakdown. But I remember that my analyst said to me, "There are no perfect mothers. You are an instinctive mother. An instinctive mother makes errors but makes good errors." At the end of the day maybe that's true: if you err, but with the intention of giving, then you err but there could be a remedy. In fact my children love me and have forgiven me almost everything.

**Perosa:** However, it seems to me that you sacrificed a lot in order to raise them.

**Montessori:** No, I didn't sacrifice anything. I know that I have to draw, to paint, to work, because for me that is indispensable. Art for me is a beneficial malady. It's a thing that a person has inside of themselves, which doesn't do you only harm but also good. It's an illness because it is an addiction.

**Perosa:** In your opinion, what is the role of art now in Italian society?

**Montessori:** It doesn't exist any more, or so it seems. Hopefully there will be an underground current. Art has stopped being a thing of value, but instead has become a commercial commodity. It was the post-modern[ism] that ruined everything. And "Berlusconism." There were such serious warning signs in Italy and today we are seeing the consequences. It is surely the same in your profession: it's not important how good you are but important how to make a career.

**Perosa:** In your opinion, what was different before Berlusconi?

**Montessori:** Yes. Everyone says that we were better off in Italy before. It's not true. Italy before was miserable. We were privileged, I was able to work and study. To work and study was very difficult for women. I met illiterate mothers. There were unimaginable conditions in the towns and villages, abuse and violence. I was a feminist

and I am still furious because the struggle is not against men, it's with men, who almost never understand anything.

**Perosa:** So one has to educate them a bit.

**Montessori:** No, not only educate—we need to demand respect. And that is something very difficult. Maybe it's better in Germany. Here, for example, there is no respect for elderly women. I take taxis because in the bus nobody gets up. At the age of forty I had the courage to want a third child. This was not done at the time and everybody predicted a disaster. A fantastic daughter, she's a girl of forty-five years, I had her with Nino. When I came to Rome I had some affairs but then I met Nino. He was just divorced from his wife, he was four or five years younger than me and much younger mentally. He was an architect just starting to take his first steps, assistant to a university professor. He had nothing. He was a very fascinating man: handsome, intelligent, greedy—very greedy, and that ruined him. I was a fragile woman, and being able to dedicate myself to something gave me a lot of strength. I dedicated myself to him in a very intense manner. He lived in a boarding house and asked his father for money. I came from Milan, I had met all the best architects in Milan, I had a much more open cultural mindset, more sense of fun, more modern, and he was fascinated by that. We started living together, and I was in love with him because he was young and full of vitality. My family didn't quite see him in the same light. Oh well, I dedicated a lot of myself to Nino, I worked for him, because to work as an architect you need a network, a social network of friendships, acquaintances. Now I can say it: a lot of Nino's projects were due to me.

**Perosa:** Regarding work, did your work give you satisfaction in the course of your life?

**Montessori:** No, absolutely not.

**Perosa:** Why?

**Montessori:** Because I worked a lot, I worked as if it was indispensable to do it, but I didn't take care when it came to the external part of my work. I didn't do what was necessary to impose myself. I did it more for Nino. In fact he became an architect and has done some very important projects. I worked a lot for myself in my basement studio.

**Perosa:** A little in the background, let's say. Do you regret not having had a role as a protagonist?

**Montessori:** I was never a protagonist, partly because I didn't want it and partly because what dominated was the man-woman union. It was predominant; there was nothing to do. Sometimes I think it was a mistake. Nino left me when I was older, making me feel miserable for a couple of years, really miserable. And then he also

behaved badly with my two older girls. When I was fifty-five I sold the house in Milan and I took this studio. He was very irritated and I said to him: “But I finally have to have something of my own.” Men don’t ever like this. It’s a question of liberty, and they just don’t accept this. Maybe Mario would have understood because he had a different upbringing—it was two different worlds.

**Perosa:** Do you think that something has changed in society from that point of view?

**Montessori:** Yes, if you are not in competition. If you are competing then I don’t think much has changed.

**Perosa:** Today how do you see Europe in fifty years’ time, are you still sceptical?

**Montessori:** I am afraid.

**Perosa:** Afraid, why?

**Montessori:** I am afraid that war will return. Because the borders are treated in such a dangerous way, it’s so unfree. They’ve become real borders.

**Perosa:** The external borders or the internal borders within Europe?

**Montessori:** Both! In my generation we based our beliefs on utopias. I, in art, I always believed that ideology was something harmful. If, whatever you do, you do for an end, you shift your interest not onto something you know but onto something that you would like to be. Generally speaking, this derails. You have to be a star, you have to be Picasso to do a thing like that. If you don’t become like [Renato] Guttuso—who did some awful paintings. First he painted still lifes, very beautiful. The style, however, has to be authentic, personal, subjective, struggling, and culturally against the current, not with the current, otherwise you will be devoured by the current, there is no remedy. This includes suffering, disillusion, repentance. All this is unfortunately wrapped up in the creative act. But you can’t eliminate it. If you eliminate it you debase the culture. And the debasement of culture that is happening now is frightening!

**Perosa:** In Europe or in Italy?

**Montessori:** In Italy more than in Europe. For example, in the summer I go for two months to Rennes in France, to my daughters. And there I’ve come to understand that there are things that are probably also in Germany, which are normally more acceptable. Starting from driving education to education in offices. There is a level of civility that doesn’t exist in Italy. My daughter Nicola, who is sixty years old, studied mathematics. My second husband said to her, “You’ll never make it.” Instead she became an excellent mathematician. But for example Nicola, despite being a very good mathematician, never became a full professor because she isn’t French. She is doing very important work for female mathematicians after experiencing institutionalised discrimination at conventions. This will also happen to you. Nowadays, out of eight

people they are obliged to find two to three women. Once it was all men, in exhibitions and such as well. It's a terrible fact that one still has to fight for these things. Nicola is tough, she was very beautiful when she was young. She does something that makes me laugh: when she goes to conventions and they call her *Madame Tchou*, she doesn't get up. Because she is not "*Madame*," she is "*Professor*."

Even today there are people who say to me, "You are not a woman painter [*pittrice*], you are a painter [*pittóre*]. You are as good as a man." I have always rejected this and I have always struggled. I insist on being called a *pittrice*. Because I have my experience as a woman, which is different than that of a man. A man does certain things, I do others, and that which I do a man cannot do.

**Perosa:** Is it possible that this game of the sexes is simultaneously the way the sexes differ from one another? It will be a very important theme for the future of Italy, of Europe, of the world.

**Montessori:** Yes, it is. The principle of what we said is the difference. And the difference is the most important because it enters into the political concept. And now in Italy, racism is frightening; in France it's even worse! Two of my daughters, Nicola and Donata, have married Jews. It's a serious business. Much more serious than you can imagine. In France there is creeping antisemitism and also not creeping which is invading people's heads.

**Perosa:** You really are worried, aren't you?

**Montessori:** Yes. I'm saying we are at the edge of an abyss. It's worse than fascism. Because now this fascism is almost total. The people who are contrary are marginalised much more than we think.

**Perosa:** On that note, one last question and then we'll finish. What is the message that you have for us young people—or less young—for us Europeans for the next fifty years?

**Montessori:** Truly the only thing I can say to the young is to study very profoundly and not let themselves be manipulated by the computer. I am saying this as the wife of Mario Tchou. Manipulation by computers is becoming such a grave amputation of the bodies of men and women, of which we are not aware. I am starting from the basic facts. At the age of eighty-eight I still know how to draw and write in a legible and beautiful way. I have very important functionality between my mind and my hand. If one doesn't have this, it is not just an amputation of a single part of the body. It is a frightening amputation which enters human thought, and makes one assume an attitude of passivity which in time becomes unbridgeable. There has to be a structure of thought, which needs to be connected to the body.

**Perosa:** Paradoxically one could say that the message you are giving to the young people of the next generation is the same that your grandfather gave you, just study.

**Montessori:** Certainly study, but in a critical manner. Not study simply to graduate. My French grandchildren for example, they're wonderful. One of them has two degrees in engineering, the other is a genius, etc. Yes, they have read things, unlike many others. And yet my granddaughter talks only of algorithms, she tells me things but doesn't understand the gravity of what she is doing: she is working to understand the desires consumers will have in a year's time, two years, three years. For example, you will buy a pink T-shirt with green dots in three years' time, and I know it because I have seen that it will happen. When I see this I become frenzied. Because if you interpret even my desires that means that I no longer have any liberty. I am like the Sardines [Italian grassroots political movement], I am with the young who want to rebel. This is not enough, however, one needs to do this in a conscious way. We are in the grip of the multinationals. My art is not recognised art because I have never had a multinational that endowed me with a billion, otherwise it would be worth two billion today. But I am very happy to be poor. I am very content not to have success because it's the only way to be able to return home, find what I find and not feel a victim. There are many victims who are victims without knowing it. And then you know what victims do?

**Perosa:** What do they do?

**Montessori:** War.

**Perosa:** Thank you very much for this interview Mrs. Montessori.