



IN MEMORIAM: Mara Selvini-Palazzoli, M.D. (1916-1999).

Carlos E. Sluzki, MD

The news of the death of Mara Selvini evokes in so many of us memories of the emotional intensity and the conceptual challenge that her participation would generate in any professional event. A true diva in the best Italian tradition, she was original, joyful, opinionated, the center of attention wherever she went, regal in the way she carried her short frame, humane in her personal contact, and stubborn in her public attitudes. And all that while not taking the world too seriously: she was as prone to laugh wholeheartedly at her own intensity as at others' reaction to it.

Mara Selvini-Palazzoli has been the leader of one of the—if not *the*—most influential "second generation" teams in the field of family therapy. Her team, which included her close associates Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Cecchin, and Giuliana Prata, became mesmerized by the novel paradigm conveyed by Watzlawick, Jackson, and Beavin's "Pragmatics of Human Communication," and seduced by the work that inspired it, that of Gregory Bateson and his co-workers Jackson, Haley, and Weakland. And breaking rank from the Italian psychoanalytic establishment, they defined themselves as systemic (cybernetic, Batesonian) family therapists. They carried that definition into their daily practice as a team and their constant reevaluation of their models. In 1980, they took the world of family therapy by storm with the publication in *Family Process* (19:3-19) of their landmark paper: "Hypothesizing, Circularity, Neutrality: Three Guidelines for the Conductor of the Session." (That team's first paper in English—"The Treatment of Children Through Brief Therapy of Their Parents"—had also been published by this journal in 1974—13:429-442.) From then on, the visibility of what became known as the Milan team grew exponentially. They became the most influential training team in Europe, and in the United States after an early visit to the Ackerman Institute and to the Mental Research Institute (MRI). In the years that followed, the team split in two and Mara continued her work with Giuliana Prata; it split again years later and Mara reorganized her team with a younger group that included her son Mateo, Stefano Cirillo, and Anna Maria Sorrentino. Mara called what she was doing "research," and with reason: she would take a viewpoint and explore it clinically to its ultimate consequences. Over and over again she would catch her audience and followers by surprise by stating in major conferences and in important articles that the beliefs she had held until that moment as truth were totally erroneous ("How could I have been so blind," she would exclaim), and that another angle of attack was "the correct one"—again, a way of guiding her own explorations with as little ambivalence as possible. So, in different periods of her evolution she was totally immersed in the treatment of anorectic patients, in paradoxes and counter-paradoxes, in the invariant prescription, in psychotic and other family games, and in new explorations of the inner space.

The influence of Mara Selvini is lasting. Suffice to say that she and her team's 1980 emphasis on what are the operations that guide the systemic therapist's behavior shifted the attention of the field away from the family-as-object-of-observation to include the therapist and his or her operations; and by those means they opened an early door to the conceptual process that allowed postmodernism and narrative approaches to enter into the field of family therapy. Interestingly enough, Mara professed herself to be rather anti-postmodern. Indeed, this traditional, conservative lady in her daily life, would (using an expression she recommended we use) *behave as if* she would believe each time that whatever she was describing was not a construct but a thing-out-there. But, let's face it, that "thing" would be once and again treated first as holy and then with irreverence, revealing her view of the world of ideas as an evolving, never-ending process. She contributed to this process with powerful, rich, challenging models—and modeling. For, in addition to the above, she was a nice, warm, caring, loyal human being.

We may all join in telling her: *"Addio, cara diva, e tantissime grazie!"*

—Carlos E. Sluzki, M.D.

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Mara Selvini died last July 1999 in Milan. When a significant person leaves us forever, a series of images go through your mind. If she is still alive, you think, you will have the chance to check your fantasy with reality. But we can't do this again with Mara.

Then who was Mara Selvini? The first Images that come to my mind are of a loving and friendly Mara behaving like a peer with whom it was fun to spend time. There were other moments, however, when she would suddenly appear rather distant as if she were part of an aristocratic circle. In our working time together, she was the one who mostly decided the rules of relationship. Then she would behave in a bossy way. But, again, at times, you could suddenly notice in her a meek and obedient attitude, ready to put herself completely in your hands. She loved to perform in front of hundreds of people, but at other times she was very shy and looking for protection. One thing was always very clear: nobody could ignore her presence.