

RITA LEVI-MONTALCINI

(Physiology or Medicine, 1986)

Dr. Rita Levi-Montalcini was an Italian neurologist, who championed human rights throughout her life. As a Jewish woman who began her research career in 1930s Italy, Levi-Montalcini's path to becoming a scientist was marked by discrimination and persecution. The enactment of race laws targeted at non-Aryan Italian citizens prevented her from taking up academic posts during World War II. Levi-Montalcini performed her research in makeshift labs as she and her family, following Italy's invasion by Germany, moved throughout Europe to evade bombings and capture by Nazi troops. Toward the end of the war, Levi-Montalcini worked as a medical doctor at a camp for displaced persons.

Levi-Montalcini's personal experience with inhumanity led to an enduring commitment to peace and human dignity. She mobilized scientists around the world to highlight the responsibilities of individuals for the protection of humanity and worked to develop a Declaration of Human Duties. Among Levi-Montalcini's primary human rights concerns was the continuing problem of gender inequality. Through a foundation in her name, she supported the education of thousands of girls and women, helping them to pursue a career in science. Levi-Montalcini, whose life exemplifies perseverance in the service of humankind, died on December 30, 2012.

"I tell young people: Do not think of yourself, think of others. Think of the future that awaits you, think about what you can do and do not fear anything."

