Letter from the Editor

Pietro Greco

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Abstract Astrophysicist Margherita Hack died in Trieste on 29 June 2013, at the age of 91. A member of the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome, she was the first woman to direct an astronomical observatory in Italy. Her scientific interests were in star spectroscopy, but the *signora delle stelle* was well-known in Italy as a science communicator and was loved for her constant presence in the public arena as a defender of civil rights.

Keywords Margherita Hack · Astronomy · Science communication

On 29 June 2013 in Trieste, Margherita Hack, the courageous, engaging, anti-conformist, free-spirited ‘lady of the stars’, passed away. She had just celebrated her ninety-first birthday. She leaves behind Aldo, her life’s companion for 70 years. She also leaves a huge void, in Italian astronomy to be sure, but above all along frontier uniting science and society which she, perhaps more than anyone else in Italy, contributed to extend and enrich. She did so much in this regard that she became the popular face of science in Italy. Her scientific success is unquestionable. An expert in stellar spectroscopy, in 1964 she became the first woman to direct an astronomical observatory, the one in Trieste, where she lived until her death. Her direction lasted 23 years, until 1987. She transformed a small provincial observatory into an internationally known centre for astronomical research. From 1964 to 1992 she taught at the University of Trieste. She was a member of the Accademia

dei Lincei in Rome. But the greatest merits of this grand woman scientist are not to be looked for among her achievements in research, significant as they are. Instead, it was her ability to engage and dialogue with a general audience of non-experts, that is, precisely along the line where science and society come together.

Margherita Hack was a great communicator, across all genres and all media. She founded magazines for ‘popular’ science, from *L’Astronomia* to *Le stelle*. Above all, she wrote for the most important Italian newspapers. She was always on the radio. She had a wonderful screen presence on television. Her conferences were attended by crowds rarely seen for a scientist. She made her debut, successfully, on the stage. She wrote an enormous number of books. In all these activities of communication Margherita Hack made use of the same ingredients: intellectual freedom, irony, conviction and *vis polemica*. Among all else, she was a Florentine and in her could be discerned the imprinting of another Florentine astronomer and scientific communicator: Galileo Galilei.

But Margherita Hack did not confine herself to communicating. She was a ‘militant scientist’. She fought a thousand battles: for freedom of research, for policies regarding research, but also for civil rights (for both humans and animals). She participated in political life and lent her image (and her unmistakeable voice) to a thousand causes, a thousand parties. Through her constant taking of sides without pretensions, she was liked by everyone. She was a militant atheist, and profoundly secular, so much so that she married a Catholic. Here then is Margherita’s greatest merit: she humanised science. She showed that researchers are human, often among the best of their kind. This is no mean feat, in a country that, from Galileo forward, has never had an easy relationship with science.

Goodbye, Margherita, and thank you.

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Margherita Hack (1922–2013). Photo by Rosalba Sgroia (public domain)

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