

# Concetto Guttuso: a Brief Remembrance

by OSCAR NALESINI

Lo scorso settembre il dott. Concetto Guttuso ci ha lasciato. Da giovane medico della Marina Militare viaggiò nel Nepal centrale assieme a Giuseppe Tucci nel 1952; era l'ultimo collaboratore ancora vivente delle spedizioni himalayane condotte dal celebre studioso.

Rientrato dal Nepal, e dopo alcuni anni trascorsi dirigendo il centro per le malattie tropicali della Marina italiana a Mogadiscio, fu arruolato dall'Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità, per cui diresse importanti progetti anti-malarici in Africa. Dopo la pensione, era tornato nella propria casa a Ragalna, sull'Etna, pur rimanendo attivo nell'organizzare aiuti in aree di crisi.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, under the bright sky of the late Sicilian summer, Dr Concetto Guttuso quietly went to join his old friends and companions of adventure at the age of ninety-eight. He was the last living witness of that extraordinary period of audacious scientific explorations and innovative research across the Tibetan wilderness, through the scorching deserts of Iran and Afghanistan, and deep into the Himalayan valleys, through which Giuseppe Tucci and his collaborators won for the Italian School of Oriental Studies a place in the forefront of several fields of study in Southern and Central Asia.

Just about every time I read one of the over two hundred emails we exchanged since the day I first contacted him (it was February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2006) until 2011, or those written later on (though much less assiduously), I always felt that a thin but tenacious thread still connects me with those men's hopes, endeavours and accomplishments.

Concetto Guttuso was born on October 20<sup>th</sup> 1921, in Scordia, a small Baroque city among orange orchards in the undulating countryside between Catania and Siracusa. He enrolled at the University of Catania when the ominous flashes of the war still lit up the sky, and graduated in Medicine and Surgery in 1945. After spending a few years at the Hospital of Scicli, in 1949 his passion for sailing and the curiosity for the world he had cultivated since youth led him to join the Health Service of the Italian Navy.

Besides the sea, the pressure of another aspect of Sicilian reality conditioned the young Guttuso's choice. His sun-kissed native country was also a place "where the malaria could be harvested" and "gets into you with the bread you eat, or if you open your mouth to speak as you walk." Though written almost seventy years before, these striking descriptions by Giovanni Verga still partially applied to South-Eastern Sicily, where the last serious outbreak of this disease occurred in 1956. This, together with the search for distant horizons, eventually persuaded him to specialize in Tropical Medicine at the University of Rome.

During those years something unexpected happened. As he loved to narrate, he read in a newspaper in February 1952 about Giuseppe Tucci's plans for an expedition to Western Nepal and that the scholar was still looking for a physician. He immediately wrote to him, putting himself forward as a companion. One letter among hundreds, which Tucci probably never even saw. Sometime later, however, while at the University of Rome, by chance Gut-