

In Memoriam Jorge Canestri

Virginia Ungar

Co-Authors: NONE

There are many reasons why we decided to write together this text 'in memoriam' of Jorge Canestri. The first is in support of one another in facing this very sad task: our mutual friend has parted very recently and the temporal distance that would allow us to accept that Jorge is no longer with us has yet to be established. Another reason is that as we are both in the leadership of two important institutions – the IPA and EPF – and we would like to pass on something of the great contributions he has made to the institutional lives of both. A third reason is that, between us, we thought that we could represent both the Argentinian aspect of Jorge's personality and pay tribute to the European part as well.

We undertake a painful but necessary task, knowing that we will fall short. His personality and great intelligence, his sensitivity, his political ability, his profound knowledge and contributions to psychoanalysis, and also his knowledge of philosophy, science, music, literature and the plastic arts were so vast that they simply cannot be addressed and described fully.

Those that had the privilege of considering him a friend (and this definitely included his patients) know also of his capacity to listen, to stay close and available, of his sharp and fun-loving sense of humour, of his tireless energy and work capacity. And how can we forget his pipe, his characteristic smile and way of gazing?

His death has been a terrible loss and it will take a lot of time to recover, but we also know that he lives in all of us, the ones who had the chance to be close to him and who will continue to be inspired by his passion for psychoanalysis and his ideas of a fairer world, with less inequity and violence and more care for the planet.

To look a bit closer at the man and his work, a good starting point for this tribute is his keynote paper for the 52nd IPA Congress, in which he begins by referring to his memories of meeting Jorge Luis Borges at a very early age. His father would take him to the writer's conferences in Buenos Aires because "listening to *sayings* of poets was an experience necessary for the juvenile souls" [\[1\]](#). Jorge says that he believes he didn't understand the meaning of the speeches he would listen to at that age, and only later did he understand that he was able to grasp "the magic in the words" of Borges, who was a writer he loved to read and re-read in his adult life. Years later, in 1984 Borges accepted to be interviewed by Jorge (who by then lived in Rome), and they spoke about his father - an old friend of the renowned author – and about their childhood memories. Canestri shares with us that Borges considered this to be the most important time of life, the one in which colours, shapes the universe is discovered.

The Argentine roots

This part of his own history was written by Jorge as it was part of his life in Buenos Aires, where he lived his childhood and went to school and University. He graduated with first class honours in Medicine from the Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires and was very proud of being a graduate of this high level and free public university in Argentina.

From 1966 until 1972 he worked at a prestigious centre in the *Servicio de Psicopatología del Policlínico* general hospital in Lanús, Buenos Aires Province, under the leadership of Mauricio Goldenberg, a renowned psychiatrist who was influenced by the psychodynamic approach and was close to renowned psychoanalysts such as Enrique Pichon Rivière, Heinrich Racker and Leon Grinberg.

Those who had the opportunity of having this experience recognize that Goldenberg trained them as psychiatrists in a different way. He was a pioneer in organizing a mental health facility inside of a General Hospital. This concept of a mental health hospitalization sector opening within a general hospital was a totally ground-breaking one not only for Argentina but for all Latin America. It was something new, as until then the only existing resource for psychiatric patients who needed hospitalization was to place them in large asylums where old and terribly dehumanizing techniques were employed. They also had areas for outpatients, children and adolescents, and day hospitals. These were the times of community psychiatry.

Mauricio Goldenberg was a huge influence on everyone who worked with him. He was a great advocate for psychoanalysis and went so far as to suggest that the young members of his staff should undergo personal analysis and if possible, start psychoanalytic training.

His centre at the Lanus hospital was a hotbed of excellent and renowned psychoanalysts. Jorge Canestri was part of this generation and he started analytic training at the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association, becoming a member of in 1973.

Jorge never lost that part of him that was attentive to the impact of the world we live in, not only regarding our practice as psychoanalysts but also in the sense of being close to the ways in which the process of subjectivation takes place in different parts of the world, always in contact with the environment.

In 1974 he emigrated to Italy with his family, settling first in Pisa where they stayed for three years before finally deciding to live and work in Rome. In 1976 he became a member of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (S.P.I.) and kept dual membership as he was also a member of the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association. In 1992 he became a promoter member and training and supervising analyst of the Italian Psychoanalytical Association (A.I.Psi.), acting as President of that association from 2007 to 2011.

Jorge Canestri received the Sigourney Award in 2004 in recognition of his work as a psychiatrist, as a psychoanalyst and for his contributions to the interface of the discipline with linguistics and neurosciences. He also contributed to bringing in the epistemological perspective of conceiving psychoanalysis with pluralistic developments.

His work and contributions to the IPA

Even if I (VU) am Argentine, I met Jorge outside of our country some years before we started to work together on the IPA Board during the second Latin American administration under the leadership of Claudio Eizirik.

Before that period, he was member of the Conceptual and Empirical Research Committee (since 2002), the Chair of the Ethics Committee (2001-2005) and also Chair of the Program Committee for the 42nd IPAC Congress that took place in Nice in 2001. I will never forget the lecture that Jorge Semprún gave at the opening of that Congress. However it was later, in 2005, that we started to work

together on the IPA Board as we were both elected as Global Board representatives and two years later as Representatives for the IPA Executive Committee.

It was then that I had the opportunity to get to know him better. In the IPA, it was in 2007 that the three models for training were approved by the Board after a period of passionate and controversial discussions. Until that time the only model that was accepted was the Eitingon one, but with that vote the Uruguayan and the French models became accepted and in a way “legal”. Before this change, a large number of French members of the IPA had been trained as candidates with a model that was not explicitly accepted. This was a big step forward to a more inclusive IPA, something maybe not obvious today when we take for granted that a French analyst or a Uruguayan one is as properly trained as any other in the world.

As with every change, there was turbulence in the air during our Board meetings, but Claudio’s leadership was crucial to keeping a collegial atmosphere and to continuing the work at hand on a range of topics with enthusiasm.

It was then, from 2007 until 2009, when we were both elected as ExCom members that we started to work together even more closely. I have vivid memories of Jorge with his pipe, listening carefully, thinking and later talking calmly and conveying his thoughtful way of dealing with institutional issues, always from a psychoanalytic perspective.

In 2009 he became the Chair of the IPA International New Groups Committee where he worked diligently until 2013. He contributed to this very important working group in different ways: his Latin American origins and his own emigration story, together with his vast experience in Europe and his close relationship with the North American region added to his condition as a polyglot (he spoke Spanish, Italian, English and French fluently) made Jorge the right person for the position.

His interest in the development in China and in the Asia Pacific region remained as he started the EPF initiative to teach the fundamental psychoanalytical concepts in China together with European and Chinese colleagues. Indeed, Jorge always embraced the spirit in which the IPA was created as a membership organization that exists because of its members and for their benefit. As an international organisation, it harbours diversities that need not only to be recognised, but also to be the basis of an exchange that enriches psychoanalysis. Canestri always advocated unity, which is where the enormous strength of the IPA lies.

As he was on the Board and was the Chair of two of the most important committees, his experience together with his devotion to psychoanalysis made him a constant source of advice and guidance to me.

His EPF Presidency was brilliant and gave us the fantastic opportunity to work together on IPA-Inter regional projects: he supported and collaborated with Psychoanalysis Today, Stefano Bolognini’s initiative, with the Visiting Candidates Program (VCP) supporting the pre-existing IPSO project, and collaborated with them and some of the Regional Organizations to help candidates participate in extended programmes of inter-regional exchange.

I have to admit, however, that it is not an easy task to describe Jorge Canestri’s personality and qualities. There is a feeling that there are not adequate words to do this. He was a true humanist, a tireless reader, a true connoisseur of the fields of arts, literature, visual arts, theatre, opera and cinema. He always advocated for the interdisciplinary dialogue of psychoanalysis with neighbouring sciences and the most remarkable thing was that he practiced this himself. He studied neuroscience,

philosophy and even mathematics and physics with great enthusiasm.

There is something that needs to be highlighted, moreover: Jorge never stopped paying attention to the context of the culture in which each analyst practices. He was one of the first psychoanalysts that I heard speak in public about the impact of migration on the subjectivities of recent times.

He had a remarkable capacity to work, with a good example of this being that he was the Editor of the Educational Section of the International Journal of Psycho-Analysis for a long period and right until the end of his life he was Member of the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, and the Editor for Europe of the International Journal of Psychoanalysis.

His life and work in Europe and his contributions to the EPF

As already mentioned above, Jorge Canestri emigrated to Italy with his family in 1974. There he first had to graduate again in medicine and surgery, but at the same time he continued to work as a psychoanalyst, initially in the S.P.I. and from 1992 on as a member and training and supervising analyst in the A.I.Psi. Besides his psychoanalytical practice he became Associate Professor of Psychology of Mental Health at the University of Rome 3, Educational Sciences from 2003 - 2008, and he was also a Visiting Professor at the University of Paris X, Nanterre, in 2004.

Specifically for the EPF, I (HB) would like to highlight his work as Chair of the EPF Working Party on Theoretical Issues from 2001 and also his offices as IPA Global Representative for Europe from 2005 - 2007 and as IPA - Euro-Representative from 2007 - 2009. As President of the A.I.Psi. he was also a member of the EPF Council from 2007 - 2011. With all this rich experience, he finally became President of the EPF from 2016 - 2020.

His election as President took place at the 28th Annual Meeting of the EPF in Stockholm. As I was part of his team that stood for election, I recall a little anecdote which characterises Jorge well in his humor and aplomb. The two teams running for election were seated in a small basement room of the conference building and from there all candidates had to appear before the Council individually and justify their candidature for the EPF offices they were seeking. During the hearing of each candidate, the others stayed behind in the small room. When Jorge returned to us from his hearing, there was a smirk on his face, but it also conveyed a certain astonishment. Curious, we asked, "So, how was it?". He smiled even more and after a small pause said, "Can you imagine what I was asked first?" and after another little pause he added, "I have been asked: How old are you?" Again, he smiled and said, "Of course I said I'm 72. It's the truth."

His reaction made it clear that he did not see his age as an obstacle to his candidacy. He was rather surprised that it was the first question and that his submitted experiences and activities seemed to be less important. Could his astonishment be taken as a sign or even proof of his denial of ageing and death? The following five years, first as president-elect and then as president, showed otherwise. He repeatedly spoke of the inevitability of even his death, but he did not want to let his still palpable and perceptible spiritual-emotional power go unused just because of his age.

The first year as President-elect and the subsequent four years as President of the EPF provided ample proof that his decision to run and his election by the EPF Council were the right decisions. Jorge Canestri was already a good team-player in the outgoing Executive, and with a successful mix of clarity and generous understanding, he fostered the coalescence of our new Executive Team from the moment he took over as President at the EPF Annual Meeting 2016 in Berlin. In the following four years of his presidency, he was resolutely committed to the scientific and

cultural diversity of the EPF and left a lasting mark on it. Characteristic of his scientific orientation was the repeated inclusion of neighbouring disciplines and other scientific fields in a deeper psychoanalytic understanding - fields such as biology, artificial reproductive technology, neurobiology or linguistics, but also artificial intelligence and robotics. Knowing the significant influence of the private theories of psychoanalysts, he was very supportive of psychoanalytic research. His broad intellectual-emotional orientation between art and science then also determined the programmatic orientation of our congresses, conferences and personal encounters. His international orientation allowed him to bring about his idea of holding the EPF Annual Conference 2018 in Warsaw, thus bringing the EPF closer to Eastern Europe. At the same time, he ensured good connections of the EPF with Latin and North America, and he initiated a scientific exchange of the EPF with China. His experiences with the fate of friends and colleagues during the Argentinean military dictatorship, which he witnessed from Italy, made him cautious and wise in dealing with threats to psychoanalysis under totalitarian conditions – not by making open statements but rather by making prudent connections. Furthermore, he was able to clearly anticipate difficult international developments. For instance, as most of us still underestimated the election chances of Donald Trump, he firmly stated: “Trump will win, and it will become a disaster.” I mention this episode as an example of his capability for maintaining clear vision.

Jorge was a polymath who always conducted conversations and discussions with us attentively, thoughtfully and seriously, while accompanying them with a high degree of humour and wit. His conviction that psychoanalysis has to be embedded in a sphere of science and arts led him also to include visits to cultural events during each of our administrative - psychoanalytical meetings as EPF Executive. For him, psychoanalysis was not separable from the achievements of cultural development. He was a cosmopolitan who could tell stories from almost all parts of the world. In this respect, he was a storyteller in the best sense of the word. At the same time, he was able to listen to each of our points of view, as well as the different points of view within the psychoanalytic community. However, this did not stop him from eventually making clear decisions and, when necessary, taking a lead but one in which he had incorporated points of view from the team’s discussion. In my experience, Jorge Canestri embodied the principle of democratic leadership, quite unlike a dictatorial attitude or laissez-faire. He respected differences, but always with the aim of unity and continuity. He taught the EPF and all of us that a clear basic psychoanalytic stance and openness to the new are not mutually exclusive but keep psychoanalysis alive.

And Jorge was generative. He encouraged all members of his team in their own psychoanalytic development, both in their scientific and institutional progress. After the election of the new Executive at the 32nd Annual Congress in Madrid in 2019, he extended a generous cooperation to all members of the new Executive. Even though the handover of office could only take place online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to our great regret, Jorge handed over the office of EPF President in the same respectful manner as he had taken it on. This was once again an expression of his democratic, supportive leadership, which was received with great gratitude by the entire new Executive.

Scientific work and publications

Jorge published numerous articles from very early on in his professional life. The list is very long and what draws our attention is that they appeared in several languages and in journals from various latitudes. He wrote very well and in all of his production it is easy to see that being a great reader influenced this ability.

Due to the abundance of his scientific work, we can only list some of his most important publications here. He was

- Co-author, with Jacqueline Amati Mehler and Simona Argentieri, of *The Babel of the Unconscious. Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages in the Psychoanalytic Dimension*.
- Editor and author, together with Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber and Anna Ursula Dreher, of *Pluralism and Unity? Methods of Research in Psychoanalysis*.
- Editor and author of *Psychoanalysis: From Practice to Theory*.
- Editor and author, with Giovanna Ambrosio and Simona Argentieri, of *Language, Symbolisation and Psychosis*.
- Editor and author, with Leticia Glocer Fiorini, of *The Experience of Time in Psychoanalysis*.
- Editor and author, with Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber and Mary Target, of *Early Development and its Disturbances*.
- Editor and author of *Putting Theory to Work: How Are Theories Actually Used in Psychoanalytical Practice?*
- Finally, he was director of the website: 'Psychoanalysis and logical mathematical thought'.

Expression of our gratitude

We now go back to the reason for writing together. Jorge introduced us to each other, and we shared different spaces with him: scientific meetings and institutional activities, but also luncheons and dinners where we could enjoy interesting and long conversations in different parts of the world, conversations informed by his vast knowledge of the productions of different cultures and of the arts in their different fields. At such times, his sense of humor prevailed, and we felt that the institutional work in psychoanalysis, even if it is hard, brings wonderful moments like the last one we remember vividly: a dinner after the opening of the 2019 IPA congress in London when we went to a restaurant with a group of friends to celebrate Julia Kristeva and her opening lecture. Looking at the pictures of that night it is easy to grasp the atmosphere of friendship and the joy of being together on a day that was very warm outside, but which also generated one of those unique moments of encounter that have something magical about them. It is nice to remember a friend as admired and loved as he was for us. Jorge has been an example and a guide for both of us. We will always miss him.

Virginia Ungar (IPA President)
Heribert Blass (EPF President)

* Borges, J.L. (1944). From Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertiu. p. 34 in *Labyrinths*. London: Penguin, 1970.
[1] Jorge Canestri (2020): *The Infantile: Which Meaning*. Keynote paper written for the 52nd IPA Congress, July 2021.