

25 years at Trieste

Towards the end of October 1964, the International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP) came formally into being in Trieste. With less than 200 scientific visitors in its first year, the Centre, under the inspired Directorship of Abdus Salam and supported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), UNESCO, and Italian national and regional authorities, has grown into a veritable world centre of scientific excellence, attracting over 4000 active researchers each year.

In 1960, a chance meeting with Trieste Professor Paolo Budinich convinced Salam that this city, sited in the far north-eastern corner of Italy but with a vivid international political history, was a highly appropriate place for an illustrious scientific future.

The establishment of the centre was approved at the 1962 General Conference of the International Atomic Energy, and subsequent local and national support enabled the new Centre to move into temporary headquarters in 1964.

In the mid-60s, Trieste research concentrated on particle physics and plasma physics, but over the years as interest, support and accommodation have expanded, these interests have widened to give a truly multidisciplinary centre with active groups in fundamental physics, condensed matter physics, mathematics, climatology, aeronomy and microprocessors.

In the past ten years, the emphasis on practice and experimental work has increased. In 1987, the first physics instrumentation school, organized by the Instrumentation Panel of the International Committee for Future Accelerators (ICFA) took place at ICTP.

Questioned about the role of the Centre, Salam speaks frequently of his experience when, after his

promising early research career at Cambridge and Princeton, he decided to return to his homeland and the newly created country of Pakistan. After several years of largely fruitless efforts, he felt stifled and isolated by the intellectual loneliness which besets scientists cut off from the main stream of modern research.

This experience helped seed the idea for the Trieste centre, where kindred spirits from developing countries far and wide could regroup to replenish their ideas and motivation to return refreshed and inspired to their work.

A statement by Robert Oppenheimer underlines this motivation – 'we have all of us to preserve our competence in our own professions, to preserve what we know intimately, to preserve our mastery. That is, in fact, our only anchor in honesty.'

Fond of parallels, Salam often cites the example of the pre-renaissance world, when modern geographical roles were somewhat reversed. The thirteenth century saw intrepid scholars like Michael the

Scot, who ventured far from the familiar but impoverished confines of his home glens to seek out and ascend the scholastic heights of the Arab University of Toledo in Spain, there to leave his mark on the research of the day.

Despite the immense success of the Trieste venture, Salam's ambitions are still set high. Through improvements in science transfer, Salam aspires at least to redress the unwieldy concentration of modern expertise in a few developed countries (June 1985, page 189).

With initial funding for three new Trieste Centres, for Chemistry, for Earth Sciences and the Environment and for High Technology and New Materials, already in place, Salam looks ahead to a world network of such centres. On 26 October, he expressed these hopes before the UN General Assembly.

To mark the Centre's 25th anniversary a five-day meeting on contemporary physics brought together many illustrious names, with Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti and International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Hans Blix among those attending the opening ceremony. In one of his final public appearances before his death on 5 December (see page 27), Edoardo Amaldi introduced Salam's talk 'A life of physics'.



Abdus Salam – living for physics