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”Alchemy”, in Our Time

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This contribution offers an unprecedented retrospective on the editorial story of “Alchimia del tempo nostro”, a book co-written by Ginestra Amaldi and Laura Fermi. It is a story holding a special historical-scientific interest and human value, which unfolds against the backdrop of the 1930s and the Second World War. The events are reconstructed through the documents emerged from the archive of the Hoepli publishing house, preserved at the University of Milan. Published in 1st edition in 1936, “Alchimia del tempo nostro” was the first Italian book dedicated to explaining the newly born nuclear physics to the general public. The volume was expanded by Ginestra and republished in 1943, while the war had interrupted the contacts between the two authors, separating them into two mutually hostile countries. With her husband Edoardo and their children, Ginestra was still living in Italy, in the “open city” of Rome, while Laura was in the USA, about to move with her husband Enrico and their children to the secret laboratories of Los Alamos. Read today, Laura and Ginestra’s book has not lost its formidable informative effectiveness, to which, however, a remarkable historical value is added, as an unaware testimony of a crucial era for science and humanity. The present historical research was stimulated on the occasion of the re-edition of “Alchimia del tempo nostro”, edited by Luisa Bonolis and Adele La Rana for the publisher Castelvechi (November 2024).

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