

Legal battles have played a key role in securing an asbestos ban in Italy. Behind each of these battles is a human community. In the region of Piedmont, the town of Casale Monferrato, which has suffered more than 3 000 deaths from asbestos exposure, symbolises the collective struggle against this killer mineral, and has demonstrated its resilience in a long series of trials against the management of the multinational company Eternit.

Angelo Ferracuti
Writer

Journey to Casale Monferrato, the asbestos town

↳ **Giuliana Busto,**
President of the
Association of
Asbestos Victims'
Families.
Photo: ©Angelo Ferracuti



In the early afternoon of this sunny, late August day, the streets of Casale Monferrato are still empty and the shops' shutters bolted. What I had imagined to be a rather sombre industrial town today takes on the discreet, distinguished appearance of a ducal city, its grand buildings surrounded by the green hills so loved by writer Cesare Pavese, which he described in his novel *The Moon and the Bonfires*.

I am staying in a small apartment on the ground floor of a very peaceful old residence. I hurry out soon after arriving, as soon as I have dropped off my luggage, full of curiosity, towards via Roma, under the dark arcades with their shopfronts and traditional-style bars. I follow the street as far as Piazza Mazzini with its equestrian statue of King Charles Albert in the middle and, behind it, the magnificent Cathedral of Sant'Evasio, built in the Lombard Romanesque style. In

Dust penetrated inside the houses and into the spinning mechanisms of the washing machines, from the workers' dirty overalls.

↳ Bruno Pesce and
Giuliana Busto.
Photo: © Angelo
Ferracuti



1907, at around the same time that Franz Kafka joined forces with his brother-in-law to set up the Hermann & Co asbestos factory in Prague, the multinational company Eternit built the largest asbestos cement plant in Europe not very far from this historic town centre, this little world that time has passed by. With a production area measuring 94 000 square metres, with 2 500 employees constantly in attendance, working without protective equipment and with bare hands in damp, dusty environments, the plant changed forever the destiny of the town's 35 000 inhabitants. The few surviving workers describe the premises, including the exterior, as grey – and the trees, the landscape

and the roads were white as if it had been snowing, so that people soon started calling it the white town. Dust penetrated inside the houses and into the spinning mechanisms of the washing machines, from the workers' dirty overalls; it was deposited in attics, in the courtyards of public offices, on cemetery pathways, on the roofing sheets common to many of the houses and also in the countryside and nearby villages; it travelled from the station to the plant; even the Ronzone church had a covering of Eternit. The dust even reached as far as here, where I am walking in the centre of the town, when the wind was up, wafting through a series of mysterious, treacherous air channels.

A paternalist factory

I meet Giuliana Busto, President of AFeVA, the Association of Asbestos Victims' Families, shortly after my walk in via Montebello, in the living room of a house full of books and colourful artwork. A small woman with a radiant, expressive look in her eyes, she remembers those days well: "Thirty-five years ago, we knew nothing, we didn't realise." But when her brother Piercarlo, a bank clerk who had never set foot in Eternit's premises, died at the age of 33 leaving behind a two-year-old daughter, she was the first to write on the funeral notice that he had died from asbestos exposure. "Our response was to make it public," she says. "If you didn't know before, we're going to tell you, so the town will finally realise what is going on. We want a better life for your daughter, that's what it said, and it caused a real sensation." We are sitting outdoors, and Giuliana speaks softly, without anger. "My niece can't even remember her father. At first, we put great big photos up in the room, but she only knows about him from what other people tell her." And of her brother, she says: "He might have had other children. His life story was cut off, a whole life project that never came about. He died within five months – from running as an athlete, he deteriorated to the point where he could no longer move." She drops her voice to a whisper. "One man killed himself after hearing the diagnosis. He went down into the cellar and shot himself." Relations with the town were never easy: the Swiss incomers were well established and the paternalist factory, seen as the "Fiat of Monferrato", secured the townspeople's loyalty from one generation to the next – there were summer camps for children, a recreational club, spa

treatments, and a litre of oil every month. “When we went to the trade union to collect signatures, people said: ‘*Why are you doing this?*’ They were scared, they’d come in from the countryside. ‘*We don’t bite the hand that feeds us.*’ They were welcomed with a deadly embrace,” she says resentfully.

In the evening, I visit the old warehouses on Piazza d’armi, where all the finished products were stored. The factory was completely decontaminated in 2016, and I am told that the location is now occupied by a park whose focal point is the “Eternit Plant Nursery” monument, created by the artist Gea Casolaro around a handkerchief tree.

One of few survivors

The following day, tall, bespectacled Bruno Pesce, the celebrated Secretary of the Chamber of Labour,¹ a tireless and articulate communicator, accompanies me to the place where the factory used to stand, together with Pietro Condello, a worker and one of the few survivors. There are still a few buildings standing, including the sealed-off block of management offices at the entrance, with its smashed windows and peeling plaster. Where the main plant used to be is now a children’s playground, and it is striking to see the 18th century surroundings at the edges of this “non-place”, a garden that you might find on the outskirts of Milan, Berlin or Hong Kong, with the same slides and identical benches and lawn. The historic gate through which the workers used to enter has disappeared altogether. “Where the park is now used to be the central core of the plant,” says Pesce. “This is where they used to make the asbestos sheets, the corrugated roofing asbestos and the pipes.” Around the factory, there were cement works because marl was extracted from the surrounding hills. “One of the best in the world,” maintains Pesce, “extracted from the quarries. We’re close to the river Po, so there’s plenty of water.” To the right, the yellow hall where the women worked, making joints and piping for the construction industry, still stands. “The plant was abandoned with tonnes of asbestos still inside, broken window panes, asbestos scattered to the four winds, uncontained, tonnes of it!” Before becoming a trade unionist, Pesce used to be a goldsmith in Valenza, and perhaps his sensitivity to the asbestos concern comes from his lifelong membership of the environmentalist association Legambiente, and from his father’s background. “He used to work for the gas company. He was a stoker, a brutal job, exposed to atrocious heat and smoke.

↴ Nicola Pondrano,
former Eternit employee
and CGIL trade unionist.
Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti



He used to be rotten with sweat when he left the workshop,” he recalls, “Completely black. They all died of respiratory diseases: he passed away at the age of 68.”

Still dressed in his blue overalls with the yellow Eternit inscription that he has worn at all 66 hearings of the trials, Pietro Condello, the worker who came from Messina in Sicily in search of employment, started working at the plant in 1976 and left when it closed down in 1989. With cropped white hair, a wrinkled face and eyes of the deepest blue, he still speaks an enchanting, heavy

I sleep propped up on pillows, otherwise I feel as though I’m suffocating.” He says there was no ventilation system in the plant, and they used to sweep the floors. “They gave us some flimsy masks, but we had to throw them away after half an hour because they were full of dust. The factory was horribly full of dust,” he says. “My wife used to wash my overalls, and she died because of that.” Anyone trying to protest was sent to the “Kremlin”: not a punitive division, but an assignment of difficult shifts and heavy jobs. Meanwhile, the company awarded the “dust

Piercarlo, a bank clerk who had never set foot in Eternit’s premises, died at the age of 33.

dialect that he rattles out at top speed. He used to work in the raw materials section, from where only two of the 30 workers have survived. “There was the loose blue asbestos,” he explains. “I was the porter – I used to take the sacks and slit them with a knife and then put them in the hoppers.” He has 73 per cent asbestosis, dust in the lungs. “I get breathless,” he goes on. “Sometimes I have to use an oxygen cylinder, and at night

allowance” of 20 000 lira extra in their pay packet to the most heavily exposed workers.

Another worker, Italo Ferrero, whom I saw in the workers’ district of Oltreponte, recently found out that he had asbestosis, developed in Brazil, where he had gone in 1949 along with others to set up the Eternit plant. Showing me the framed photos of his relations on a shelf in the dining room, he said of each: “My brother-in-law Giorgio:

mesothelioma!”, “My mother-in-law,” a silver-haired woman, “mesothelioma!”, “My sister: peritoneal cancer, asbestos”.

The first person to notice what was happening was Nicola Pondrano. He was a “24-year-old rookie” from Montefibre di Vercelli when he arrived in Casale in 1975. When I met him, he spoke to me about the plant as “a frightening place, old premises where you could see the wear on the faces of the workers, a place full of damp and dust.” Reading the funeral notices posted on the marble column at the entrance, he realised that the workers were all dying young, at 52, 54, 56: people who never lived to collect their pension. “I wasn’t intimidated by the social and environmental context,” he explained. “I didn’t have any children to provide for. But when I said there was a problem, I became the problem.” That is why he was never promoted to be a chemist, which was his profession. One day, during a period of temporary layoffs under the *Cassa integrazione* (redundancy fund) system, he set out to explore the plant, passing through the various sections until he came to the place where the asbestos was processed. He saw an elderly worker sitting on a sack, eating a sandwich. When the man

Cartier de Marchienne were found guilty of causing an environmental disaster with wilful intent, encompassing a series of claims for compensation. “Workers, hundreds of deaths among local inhabitants,” details Pesce. “But also individual cases, acknowledgment of the harm caused by fear and risk – those who lived in fear that they might contract the disease.” The conviction was upheld on 3 June 2013, and the penalty was increased to 18 years. Finally,

The workers were all dying young, at 52, 54, 56: people who never lived to collect their pension.

saw him, he said in dialect: “What have you come to do in here? Have you come to die too?” Nicola became the spokesperson for the works council, and later, with Pesce, he set up a steering committee within the union campaigning for zone-adjusted wage bargaining, out of which grew, in 1990, the Comitato Vertenza Amianto (Asbestos Dispute Committee). They began to file claims for compensation, eventually bringing legal proceedings, in which delegations from France, Brazil and Switzerland took part. The emblematic story of Casale Monferato was also followed by the USA, Japan, Greece, Britain and Spain – wherever movements existed demanding justice for the victims of the killer mineral that strikes down 200 000 people a year worldwide.

The first conviction was a 16-year sentence, given at the first hearing on 13 February 2012, which Bruno Pesce describes on the drive back as “exceptional”. The owners Stephan Schmidheiny and Louis De

in 2014, the Court of Cassation time-barred the offence, because, under a provision of the Rocco Penal Code from the 1930s, the statute of limitations runs from the time the work that caused the harm ceases, irrespective of the rising death toll, which had not yet reached its peak. “I wept with disappointment that day,” adds Pesce as he drives. “The supreme organ of our judicial system aiming to provide maximum safeguards for the accused, when the crime is a corporate crime,” he remarks harshly. “And even after so many deaths, the protection of civil liberties, the inviolability of capital, are rigorously applied, denying justice to those who have died.” He adds: “What does ‘time-barred’ mean if yet another person died yesterday?” However, on 12 May 2015, a new trial, “Eternit Bis”, commenced in Turin, addressing the deaths that have occurred at the multinational’s various premises, and this will resume in Novara on 27 November 2020.



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“The workers were the source of my knowledge”

The morning before I leave, I meet Daniela Degiovanni at the office of Associazione Vitas, which looks after people who are dying at home or in hospices, very close to where I am staying. She is a blonde woman with mild manners and a gentle gaze, who speaks with heartfelt sensitivity. As a very young woman in 1975, she graduated in medicine and went to work for the Italian General Federation of Labour (CGIL). “My role was to examine workers who had occupational diseases, almost all of them from Eternit, but I didn’t know anything then: the workers were my true source of knowledge.” She has a very strong memory of the people she saw in the clinic, both young and old. “They all had the same affliction, finding it very difficult to breathe, even just walking upstairs, and suffering existentially, worried, distressed. ‘You can have no idea of what goes on in there,’ they said. ‘Sometimes, with the sea of dust, you can’t even see your workmate next to you.’”

“I got to know the workers not just for their disease but their life story,” she continues, sitting opposite me at the desk as, feeling deeply moved, I write. “One of them had a small son who was afraid of dying and couldn’t sleep at night. Another woman had a brother who died ‘with water in his lungs’,

1. In Italy, the Chambers of Labour started up at the end of the 19th century on the initiative of the socialist workers’ movement. Banned during the fascist period, they were reintroduced and still form the local interbranch structure of the main trade union confederation, the CGIL.





📍 Worker Pietro Condello in front of the offices of the former Eternit plant in Casale Monferrato.

Photo: ©Angelo Ferracuti

↳ Daniela Degiovanni, oncologist and leading figure in the fight against asbestos.

Photo: ©Angelo Ferracuti



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as people used to say.” So now, Degiovanni is not just motivated by a political passion, but by what she calls “the sharing of a human suffering that involved not only the workers but the whole of their family. I think I’ve seen several generations and entire families wiped out by the disease.” She remembers by heart the first diagnoses of pleural mesothelioma, which served to file compensation claims, including that of her friend Luisa, who died after her father and a brother had already passed away. “She was a really lovely lady, full of the joy of living, who lived near the station and, as a child, used to go and

play where the trains from Russia and South Africa came in, carrying sacks of crocidolite asbestos. She died of mesothelioma.” She cannot forget the suffering, and most of all the “suffering from the fear of dying”. Patients with mesothelioma have excruciating pain. “They contort themselves trying to alleviate it,” explains Degiovanni. “They have such pain that, in order to bear it, they will adopt physical postures to help relieve them from the suffering. I used to see them walking along, hunched and crooked.”

And still now, the youngest are dying: those who were children when the plant closed 30 years ago, like Daniela Zanier. I am reminded of her as I walk briskly towards the station along via Bistolfi. I saw her yesterday at the AFeVA headquarters, sitting in a row alongside others in the small office where all the files of the 3 000 or so people who have fallen ill and then died are kept. She had some X rays after a bout of bronchopneumonia. Her right lung was cloudy; a huge amount of fluid was drawn off with a syringe and, after the biopsy, it was diagnosed as mesothelioma. “It’s a year since I found out I was ill,” this smiling but gaunt-faced blonde woman told me. “When the oncologist saw the CAT scan, he said I’d been ill for at least 30 years. All of us in Casale are living with this sword of Damocles over our heads, we all know it could happen at any moment.” She confided to me that people think of her as a “dead woman walking”.

“I had a tough chemotherapy course, an experimental therapy, but I had to abandon it because I fainted,” she says, and she has so much anger and fear inside her. Of Stephan Schmidheiny, the boss of Eternit, she says sarcastically: “Just think how much meditation he must have done to relieve the stress of those trials.” Grimacing resentfully, she clenches her fists and then looks me proudly in the eye “Damn him.” ●



FURTHER READING

Maria Roselli (2014) *The asbestos lie. The past and present of an industrial catastrophe*, ETUI, Brussels, 180 pages. Available on www.etui.org

Benjamin Lysaniuk, Maria Fernanda Cely-Garcia and Juan Pablo Ramos Bonilla (2019) *Sibaté, a Colombian town poisoned by asbestos*, *HesaMag*, No. 20, p. 52. Available on www.etui.org

Giampiero Rossi (2012) *Eternit, la fibre tueuse. Le combat pour la justice de Casale, ville martyre de l'amiante*, *La découverte*, Paris.