

AFTERWORD

Laurie Kazan-Allen

Casale Monferrato, a picturesque town in north-western Italy, has become a universal symbol of defiance to the world's worst industrial killer: asbestos. The almost biblical trial mankind has undergone at the hands of global asbestos profiteers is exemplified by the fate of Casale's workers and townspeople. Emerging like a phoenix from the devastation which has befallen this community, the vibrant and effective grassroots campaign for "justice, decontamination, research" has become a beacon of hope for civil society the world over. The "Great Asbestos Trial" of individuals implicated in this scandal has achieved an iconic status not only for the crimes it has exposed but also for what it has revealed about the way corporations make life and death decisions. The Turin proceedings have exploded Eternit's attempt to keep control of the Casale story. The cat is now well and truly out of the bag. There are many lessons to be learned from the experience of Casale Monferrato not least of which is the warning to all company executives: you too could be held to account for the decisions you make and the corporate policies you administer.

You would have thought that once the lawsuit was being tried in front of the Turin judges, the Casale campaigners could have sat back and watched justice be done. Alas, this was not to be. In July, 2011, just as lead prosecutor Raffaele Guariniello was making his closing statement to the Court, it was announced that the town of Cavagnolo had agreed a tombstone deal with Stephan Schmidheiny's lawyers. In return for €2 million, Cavagnolo would withdraw "from this and any future trials (against Eternit) that it might be involved in."¹ Commenting on that decision, the Mayor of Casale said: "It is clear that a proposal such as that could never be even considered by a city like Casale." Yet just a few months later, the council of Casale Monferrato was engaged in secret negotiations to settle the municipal claim against the same defendant. The first news campaigners had of the multimillion euro deal came from a newspaper article published in November. After that, all hell broke loose. The town was literally torn apart by the implications of the municipal sell-out.

When the Casale Monferrato council met on December 16 to vote on the €18.3 million offer, the town hall was surrounded by outraged protestors. The members of the Council, which voted to accept the deal, were so frightened by the public unrest that they cowered inside the chamber till the early hours of Saturday morning. As the Christmas holidays loomed, it was widely expected that the agreement would be signed by Mayor Giorgio Demezzi by the December 31 deadline. But, Schmidheiny's legal team had underestimated the determination of the Casale campaigners and the respect with which they were held. From church pulpits, religious leaders prayed that the councillors would embrace not betray those who were suffering. The local priest Don Paulo Busto held a mass in memory of the asbestos dead in a church directly across from the town hall. Alceste Catella, the Bishop of the Dioceses of Casale Monferrato, joined the controversy when he asked the Mayor to "lead the city in this moment of great suffering: 'please, I beseech you do something that will prove your respect for the suffering of so many of our citizens.'"²

When news was released, on December 22, that Italy's Minister of Health himself had intervened, it became clear that "the Casale issue," had achieved such prominence that the Mayor would be forced to reconsider. New Year's Eve came and went – no deal was signed. As 2012 dawned, Health Minister Renato Balduzzi took part in separate meetings with Mayor Demezzi and the Casale campaigners; ministerial meetings on New Year's Day, a national holiday in Italy, are a virtually unheard of phenomenon. Having previously praised the "leading role" played by the Casale town council in "the long and hard social struggle" for justice, on January 1st the Minister reaffirmed the Government's concern for the citizens and support for the town. The response to Italy's "national asbestos emergency," would, the Minister promised, be spear-headed by Casale Monferrato, the country's "anti-asbestos capital."³ Recognizing the wider implications of the case against the Eternit executives, Minister Balduzzi spoke of the continued

¹ Kazan-Allen L. Surprise Moves by Schmidheiny's Lawyers. November 27, 2011. <http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-surprise-moves-schmidheiny-lawyers.php>

² Mossano S. Nessun patto con L'Eternit. (No pact with Eternit.) La Stampa. December 22, 2011. <http://www3.lastampa.it/cronache/sezioni/articolo/lstp/435420/>

³ Mossano S. La "capitale" anti amianto (The anti-asbestos capital). La Stampa. January 2, 2012

⁴ Joint Press Release by AfeVA, CGIL, CISL and UIL. January 3, 2011.

production and use of asbestos in Europe and the symbolic importance of Casale's struggle at home and abroad. At the second meeting, Minister Balduzzi impressed leaders of the asbestos victims' group AfeVA and trade union colleagues with his "in-depth knowledge of the 'asbestos emergency' as a national and global issue."⁴ He laid out a detailed approach to the problem which included meetings in Rome with leading stakeholders such as representatives of the Ministries of Health, Environment, Economic Development and Labor to plan a coordinated response by national agencies, local authorities and federal bodies to the asbestos scandal.

A day of civil action, mounted under the banner of *Nessun Dorma* (Let No One Sleep), on January 7th attracted crowds of supporters who took part in a silent torchlight procession through Casale Monferrato, attended a musical tribute to the victims and prayed at a midnight vigil on the steps of the Palazzo San Giorgio,

the Mayor's office. Outside the church of San Paulo, actress Caterina Deregis read a poem based on the grief of Assunta Prato and Giuliana Busto, women who lost a husband and a brother to asbestos-related disease. Amidst the public outpouring of support, 2000+ people called on municipal officials to honor their commitment to the victims and tear up the proposed deal with asbestos defendant Stephan Schmidheiny.

As we go to press, it is impossible to know how the situation will develop. There have been so many twists and turns already that one can't help but feel the master strategist himself Niccolò Machiavelli looking over our shoulder. In such circumstances we might do well to emulate the faith of Romana Blasotti Pavesi, the President of AfeVA, who wrote "our trust in justice never left us." We hope that the verdict handed down on February 13, 2012 will vindicate that trust.

January 2012



Silent torchlight procession in Casale Monferrato on "day of action," January 7, 2012. Photo Courtesy of Rodolfo Mazzoni.

For news of what happened on February 13, 2012 and thereafter see the following websites:

Asbestos in the Dock: <http://asbestosinthedock.ning.com>

AfeVA: <http://www.afeva.it/>

International Ban Asbestos Secretariat: <http://www.ibasecretariat.org>