

11. ETERNIT VS. THE VICTIMS

Laurie Kazan-Allen

The plans, strategies and moods of the Casale Monferrato campaigners as well as the efforts of individuals charged with holding Eternit’s executives to account were meticulously monitored by a network of informants, so-called “local PR correspondents,” and consultants. The extent of the super-web of Eternit-paid advisors, dubbed the “Italy Team” in confidential corporate files, is revealed in the extensive archive of sensitive memos, briefings and telefax messages seized by police during raids on the Milan office of the global public relations company of GCI Chiappe Bellodi Associates (Bellodi).¹ From the premises at 16 Carducci Street, Guido Bellodi coordinated an operation which reported on developments in Casale Monferrato, including the efforts of community activists, the vacation plans of key litigators, the resources available to Italian prosecutors, statements by members of the prosecution team, the affiliations of local politicians and members of the Government of the Region, the latest epidemiological publications, press coverage and filming by Italian and foreign journalists. A “Quarterly Report about the Italian Eternit case” dated September 29, 2000 goes as far as remarking on the participation of community leaders at the world’s first Global Asbestos Congress:

“A Casale delegation attended the recent asbestos Congress held Sept. 17-20, 2000 in Osasco, Brazil. It included the Mayor Mr. Mascarino, Mrs. Degiovanni (oncologist of ASL 21 and member of the asbestos team), Mr. Pesce and Mr. Ponderano (CGIL). Prof. Terracini was among the speakers of the epidemiology panel.”²

The fact that Guido Bellodi had a seemingly endless number of individuals to carry out his orders indicates the vast financial resources which his paymasters were willing to throw at the challenge posed by the mounting

death toll of former Eternit workers and local residents. Nowhere in any of the files I read was sympathy expressed for those whose lives had been destroyed by the company or its affiliates.

The ultimate aim of the audacious Bellodi defense strategy was to “have the maximum possible guarantee that everything is and will be under control.” Time after time, the need to ensure that the epidemic of Eternit-caused deaths resulting from the operations of the Casale Monferrato asbestos-cement factory remained just a local story was stressed.³ The rigorous implementation of a communications plan which delineated specific roles and tasks to those on the Eternit payroll was the bedrock of the public relations campaign “to face the Casale issue.” Deviation from the strategies contained in the company’s master plan, known as “The Bible,”⁴ could result in “a clever journalist writing an in-depth story on (sic) a major media in Italy or abroad,”⁵ warned Bellodi. A memo from June 1992 indicates how Eternit’s PR commandments were rolled out on a daily basis; it is of interest to note that the layout of the text shows a demarcation between levels 1 and 2 which are in the public relations area and levels 3 & 4 which are in the “No Communication Area”:

“Strategic Objectives in Italy

The strategic orientation of our PR-policy has been carefully devised and laid down over the last years. I think it is valid and should not be altered:

First target:

Try to keep the issue on LEVEL 1 [diagram shows level 1 as controlled by Eternit (Italy) (in receivership); initials assigned to this level are GB in cooperation with MM].⁶

¹ A 1992 document listed GCI offices in Amsterdam, Bologna, Brussels, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Genoa, The Hague, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, Maastricht, Melbourne, Mexico City, Mila, Munich, New York, Paris, Rome, Stockholm Sydney, Tokyo, and Toronto.

² The documents available to us for study which were confiscated by the police at the Bellodi offices (the Bellodi files) and later submitted as evidence during the Turin trial were written in Italian, English and German and cover the period from 1992 to 2002. The pdf files we have obtained often contain a mixture of documents. Citations of relevant files will be made according to the original classifications: Bellodi_Doc_125-148.pdf (p 40).

³ Bellodi_Doc_112_T Martac.pdf and Bellodi_Doc_123_T Martac.pdf

⁴ Bellodi_Doc_182A_T. Crosetto.pdf

⁵ Strictly Confidential Memo. Bellodi_Doc_T. Martac.pdf (p. 2).

⁶ GB: Guido Bellodi; MM: Maurizio Maresca

Second target:

Try to keep the issue on LEVEL 2, e.g. when media reports in Switzerland or Germany force us to leave LEVEL 1. [Diagram shows level 2 as controlled by NUEVA AG (Thalwill) formerly: Swiss Eternit Group; initials assigned to this level are FS in cooperation with IH.]⁷

Third target:

Avoid at any rate to allow the issue to spread to LEVELS 3 or 4. The essential precondition is that all inquiries (sic) are consistently directed to LEVELS 1 and 2 and that no comment on the subject is made in any way whatsoever above these levels. [Diagram shows level 3 as controlled by ANOVA AG (Hurden); no initials are assigned to level 3. Level 4 is controlled by STS;⁸ no other personnel are listed at level 4.]

Recommendation:

Even today (June 1992) it seems quite possible that the issue can be confined to LEVEL 1 (LEVEL 2 at the most) if everybody involved strictly sticks to the objective. That is what we should try to achieve.”⁹

To achieve the objectives set for Eternit’s troops of lawyers, public relations advisors, industry consultants and academic experts, working parties were set up. The membership of these bodies drew on in-house talent such as personnel from Eternit AG, Eternit S.p.A., the Swiss Eternit Group, Nueva Ltd., but also bought in talent from outside companies like GCI Chiappe Bellodi Associates and Buro fur Medieberatung (Bonn) and hired independent experts and contractors as needed. To facilitate communication amongst those involved, contact lists were drawn up with details of business and home addresses, and office and home telephone and fax numbers. The names of participants in some of the key Eternit groups are noted below:

- **Italy Team:** L. Mittelholzer, B. Schneider, M. Maresca, H. Thoni, STS (Stephen Schmidheiny?), G Bellodi, L. B. Fetz, G. Buttiker, A. Barbieri, E. Heini, J. Drolshammer, E. Bontem-

PELLI, F. Sommer, U. F. Gruber, E. Costa, H. U. Liniger, W. Schurer, U. Garaventa, K. Villinger, P. Bernasconi

- **PR Team**¹⁰ (nickname “Team Stampa”): Co-ordinator: Guido Bellodi; Press Officer (Milan) Andrea Barbieri; Press Officer (Rome) Roberto Maria Zerbi; Environmental [Issues]: Emilio Costa (Genoa) and Ulrich Gruber
- **Crisis Management Team:** Wolfgang Schurer, Dr. Gero Buttiker, Dr. J. Kaegi, Dr. Benno Schneider, Walter Anderau, Hans Thoni, F. Sommer, Leo Mittelholzer, Guido Bellodi
- **Legal Team:** International – J. Drolshammer and Italy – Prof. Alberto Bosisio, Avv. Ubaldo Foppiano, Avv. Maurizio Maresca
- **Local PR correspondents:** Rossanna Revello (Genoa), Maris Cristina Bruno (Casale Monferato), Rino Labate (Messina)

The incredible precision with which the Eternit defense was conducted is well illustrated by the almost forensic division of tasks amongst members of the legal team. Key personnel were asked to develop legal strategies to: counter allegations made by the victims; “overcome or to avoid the corporate veil,” avoid liability for environmental damages in Italy and Switzerland and help minimize Eternit’s liability to third parties such as the Italian government agency, INAIL.¹¹ Other legal professionals and consultants were charged with: uncovering and/or exploiting jurisdictional loopholes, designing corporate exit strategies such as the setting up of trust funds, archiving company records and identifying potential expert witnesses, representing Eternit employees in other Italian trials i.e. those in Cavagnolo in 1995 and 2000, establishing a fund to pay the legal fees of beleaguered Eternit executives,¹² liaising with Eternit lawyers from the Belgian Eternit Group and other sister companies and studying the evolution of legal precedents such as those emerging from the Seveso case which might impact on Eternit’s position.

⁷ FS: Frank Sommer; IH: Ida Hardegger.

⁸ It is of relevance to note that in none of the Bellodi files I read was mention made of Stephen Schmidheiny. In at least four instances, however, the initials STS were found in the paperwork and they are believed to stand for Stephan Schmidheiny. In a confidential memo written on September 1, 1994, the final section heading is: “Public relations aspects – Relations with Belgium Group.” The notes under this title state: “Different options in case of developments: (a) strong attacks in the press against the Group/STS related with Casale; (b) direct involvement of the Group/STS ...”

⁹ Bellodi_Doc_123_T Martac.pdf

¹⁰ Bellodi_Doc_101_T Zallio.pdf

¹¹ Bellodi_Doc_108.pdf (p. 3-4).

¹² Bellodi_doc_127.pdf

The Bellodi network was well aware of the need for constant input from on-the-ground sources; in the pre-internet age remote access to news on local developments was not possible through the click of a button. Information contained in monthly reports from “local PR correspondents,” which was circulated to Bellodi–Eternit personnel not only kept them up-to-date but also provided impetus for future defensive actions. Feedback from Casale Monferrato was gleaned by the continuous monitoring of news releases, keeping current on local gossip and the infiltration of meetings held by AFEVA, the group representing asbestos victims and family members from Casale Monferrato, and AFLED (l’associazione famigliari lavoratori Eternit deceduti: The Association of Dead Eternit Workers), the organization which preceded it. An individual named in the Bellodi files as having undertaken some of these tasks was freelance journalist Maria Cristina Bruno; there may have been others.¹³ Commenting on the infiltration of AFEVA by Maria Cristina Bruno, AFEVA’s Bruno Pesce said:

“She spied on us day after day, year after year, attending all the union meetings, asking questions on the proceedings... Schmidheiny was paying the Bellodi practice which paid its informer(s)...”¹⁴

Transcripts of briefings by Maria Cristina Bruno, which have been translated from Italian, are attached as Appendices A and B. They are a mixture of tittle-tattle, recycling of Casale Monferrato media coverage and, what appears to be, inside knowledge of current developments. Documents seized by the police reveal that whatever the quality of Bruno’s reports, they were widely circulated to members of the “Italy Team.” One of her reports, dated October 6, 1993, is occupied with news of scientific developments:

“The detonator is about to be triggered on the figures relating to the epidemiological study and environmental sampling. The trade unions are concerned and are trying to increase awareness and public opinion on the severity of the problem or at least of how bad the problem is.

I have heard they are trying to gather information on the companies that currently operate in the province and that are still using asbestos.

The aim of their work is for INAIL [a government agency providing occupational insurance and welfare] to be concerned or involved directly. Data have not yet been submitted or made public. The trade unions have been informed of the results and currently the data are with the health district and with the doctors who are studying the asbestos-cement issue. As well as the information I have enclosed I was unable to acquire any more detailed information. The doctors have an embargo and are not releasing any information of any kind.

The health district is currently awaiting the Ministry’s go ahead to be able to publish the data. Currently there are problems which are linked to the funding of such project which has been promised a number of times but has not yet come through. While waiting to give you further information best regards.”

In the covering note by Guido Bellodi, which was circulated to Gero Buttiker, Ferdinand Elsener, Erich Heini, Ulrich F. Gruber and Frank Summer on October 6 along with the text of the “report received today from our correspondent [Bruno] in Casale,” Bellodi warned “the situation might have alarming developments.”¹⁵ The speed with which valuable knowledge was being gathered and disseminated to Eternit’s “Italy Team” was truly impressive. Within just a few hours of a November 30, 1993 trade union assembly on Casale’s asbestos issue, a typed four-page report detailing presentations by named speakers, discussions and plans for future action on behalf of the injured was being circulated through the company’s network.¹⁶

The issue of Eternit’s liability for the clean-up of asbestos pollution in Casale Monferrato and elsewhere was regarded as high priority. Commenting on a paper by Italian epidemiologists, in 1995 Dr. Ulrich Gruber, a long-time Eternit insider, wrote: “In conclusion, the pa-

¹³ Anonymous briefings from Casale Monferrato dated June 28, 1993 and November 29, 1993 were sent to Guido Bellodi and Maurizio Maresca and comment on a variety of issues including: “increasing rumors from the trade unions concerning a possible reopening of the criminal and civil proceedings [against Eternit];” these cases would be brought on behalf of residents and former workers who have contracted mesothelioma. The content of a television program shown on November 18 is reported: “The positive side of it, in my opinion, is that there was a very low audience due to the time when it was broadcast.” Statements made in the documentary by Epidemiologist Benedetto Terracini, Raffaele Guariniello, Bruno Pesce and former workers are mentioned and the writer concludes “there is a very bad situation... and there are possible dangers for the future.” Bellodi_Doc-120.pdf

¹⁴ Espionage and Misinformation. ANDEVA Bulletin. September 2011.

Mossano S. The Continuation of the Eternit Hearing (“Eternit, Seguito Udienza”). Alessandria edition of La Stampa. July 4, 2011.

¹⁵ Bellodi_Doc_108-124.pdf (page 45).

¹⁶ Bellodi_108-124.pdf (p. 52, 53-56).

per is a very dangerous one because it suggests that Eternit has been polluting the entire city of Casale...”¹⁷ Proposals being considered by municipal, state, regional and central authorities to decontaminate Eternit’s former warehouse in Casale Monferrato and the Po riverbanks, where vast amounts of asbestos waste had been dumped, were assiduously monitored by the company. Typical comments in the Bellodi documentation about the environmental ramifications of Eternit’s Italian asbestos-cement operations are noted below. While the English in these passages is sometimes a bit hard to follow and is often grammatically incorrect, the sense of what is being said is clear:

- “The interest towards the asbestos issue is still alive and especially the first point might well represent the risk to become a wider and serious environmental issue. **The most pessimistic forecast would be that, in case of reclamation of the whole town of Casale, the Italian State could well try to take the relevant funds out on the (sic) ‘responsible’ for the pollution.** From our point of view this means that the situation could become rather worrying.”¹⁸
- “A **‘supercomitato’ (Supercommittee) was constituted in order to face the all (sic) environmental problems in Casale.** Such a Supercomitato promoted a meeting with the representative of the Government. They met the Minister to the Environment, Matteoli, and the Direttore General, Clini (June 23rd). Concerning the bonification [decontamination] of the places there is a strong debate. The actual Mayor is contrary to use state financial aids (in order to avoid negative publicity) while the others are in favour.”¹⁹
- “The expert reports of the Court (not yet officially disclosed) and the Municipality inspections would show that **all the Targia area (Sicily) is polluted with asbestos dust.**”²⁰
- Regarding an ongoing criminal investigation in

Siracusa related to the Eternit factory: “It seems that the **Public Prosecutor in the Pretura is investigating concerning the abusive and unauthorized discharge and illicit stockage of asbestos waste within the factory and or on the seabed in front of the factory.**”²¹

- “**The Environmental department seems to have decided to push for the environmental actions.** The Director General has sent to Siracusa his own representative. Such action, suggested also from the political forces – Forza Italia (Mrs. Prestigiacomio) and Rete (Mr. Piscitello) – at the national level, could be initiated also within the criminal proceeding sub A.”²²
- “Work for cleaning up the [Casale] Eternit factory was finally started in late August (2000). Work for removal of asbestos sheets from different public buildings is in progress... No development for the time being about the environmental pollution issue [in Sicily].”²³

Eternit’s carefully devised strategy for keeping a lid on the Italian asbestos scandal worked. Even as the number of deaths grew, new ways were found to divert attention from the company’s culpability. Lawyers continued to thrive as did spin doctors and Eternit informers. Unlike the fortune of asbestos conglomerates in the U.S. and the UK, Eternit balance sheets seemed impervious to compensation claims from the company’s victims. The two men accused in the Great Asbestos Trial must have felt secure that they would never see the inside of an Italian jail. Whatever the outcome of this trial and the appeals which will no doubt follow, Eternit has been exposed as a criminal enterprise dedicated to the pursuit of profit at whatever cost to the workforce and local community. As for the part played in this humanitarian disaster by Stephan Schmidheiny and Jean-Louis Marie Ghislain de Cartier de Marchienne, that will be judged by the Turin Court.

November 2011

¹⁷ Bellodi_Doc_149-194.pdf

¹⁸ Bellodi_Doc_118_T Martac.pdf

¹⁹ Bellodi_Doc_126_T Martac.pdf

²⁰ Telefax Message dated June 12, 1995 from Pier Lodigiani of the Bellodi firm to Gero Buttiker, Ferdinand Elsener and Maurizio Maresca. Bellodi_Doc_149-194.pdf (p 53).

²¹ Report by Maurizio Maresca. February 22, 1995. Bellodi_Doc_164.pdf

²² Ibid.

²³ Bellodi_Doc_125-148.pdf

Report by Maria Cristina Bruno²⁴

Appendix A

Maria Cristina Bruno piazza Castello 11 15033-Casale Monferrato (Al)

Casale Monferrato 02.09.1993

Guido Bellodi
Chiappe Bellodi Associates
Via Carducci, 16
20123 Milan

Object: Eternit Monitoring²⁵

As usual, I am sending you a report on the press for July and August. The Monferrato, which is a local newspaper that is published twice a week whose director is Marco Giorcelli has published the following articles:

July 6, 1993

The Casale Deputy (MP) for the “Rifondazione” [the Refounding Communist Party] Angelo Muzio is still involved in the asbestos problem from a legal point of view. In the meantime, the asbestos problem is still also being discussed in the Province of Alessandria at the Building School [this was one of the technical and vocational schools where skilled workers for the building and construction industry were trained].

July 13, 1993

More early retirement applications by former Eternit workers. The Casale case is also discussed at S.A.C.A.²⁶

July 16, 1993

The lower chamber [the Chamber of Deputies in Italy; roughly the equivalent of the House of Commons in Britain] voted on a decree for pensions for former Eternit workers.

In the debate following MPs from Casale Monferrato spoke. Angelo Muzio from the Refounding Communists, Alda Grassi from the Northern League.

July 27, 1993

On the July 27, 1993 the same “Asbestos Decree” was voted on in the Senate. It was approved and everyone was pleased and there were comments by Angelo Muzio who was the MP for the Refounding Communists.

The Stampa [Il Stampa] newspaper reported the news on the page of the Province of Alessandria and also published the following articles:

- July 9, 1993: *Delays in the settlements for former Eternit workers.*
- July 11, 1993: *The lower chamber of Parliament is examining the decree on asbestos.*
- July 20 1993: *Delays with regional funding for the decontamination of the former Eternit warehouses.*
- July 24, 1993: *Senate approves the decree on asbestos.*

The “Vita Casalese,” a local Catholic weekly directed by a priest called Don Paolo Busto, published:

- July 29, 1993: *The Senate approved the asbestos decree.*
[This piece contains] very positive comments by Angelo Muzio, who is local Deputy belonging to the Refounding Communist Party.
- August 26, 1993: *The decontamination of the former Eternit warehouse is still blocked.*
[This piece explains that the reason for this delay is] because of the lack of regional funding which was approved but never provided. [It also states that] we’re all very pleased by the approval of the decree on asbestos [and includes] comments by the INPS [Italian Pension Agency].

I have enclosed the above listed documents and also I am enclosing a copy of the decontamination and reconversion project of river Po banks which the Department of Environment of Casale has prepared. The project has been criticised several times by the Northern League and is currently blocked.

As far as other news is concerned, unfortunately, I can’t really give you any other information due to the holidays but I will be sending you any other information as soon as possible.

Nothing more to add. Best regards,

Dr. Maria Cristina Bruno

²⁴ Translated from Italian.

²⁵ The Italian phrase “monitor Eternit” has been translated as Eternit Monitoring.

²⁶ S.A.C.A: Societa per azioni Cemento Amianto (Asbestos Cement Ltd. shareholding company).

Telefax

From: Maria Cristina Bruno piazza Castello 11 15033-Casale Monferrato (Al)

To: Dr. Guido Bellodi/ cc: Maurizio Maresca

Pages: 1 + 3

Object: The object of this communication is to report on the articles which were published yesterday in the paper Il Monferrato and le Stampa

Casale Monferrato, 06.10.1993

The detonator is about to be triggered on the figures relating to the epidemiological study and environmental sampling. The trade unions are concerned and are trying to increase awareness and public opinion on the severity of the problem or at least of how bad the problem is.

I have heard they are trying to gather information on the companies that currently operate in the province and that are still using asbestos.

The aim of their work is for INAIL to be concerned or involved directly. Data have not yet been submitted or made public. The trade unions have been informed of the results and currently the data are with the health district and with the doctors who are studying the asbestos-cement issue. As well as the information I have enclosed I was unable to acquire any more detailed information. The doctors have an embargo and are not releasing any information of any kind.

The health district is currently awaiting the Ministry's go ahead to be able to publish the data. Currently there are problems which are linked to the funding of such project which has been promised a number of times but has not yet come through. While waiting to give you further information best regards.

NB: The figures referring to the epidemiological data highlight an incidence of an increase of mesotheliomas amongst non-directly exposed citizens that is to say amongst the community or population or residents who were not directly exposed [to asbestos at work].

Maria Cristina Bruno



Pictured in Brazil attending the Osasco Global Asbestos Congress in 2000 are Barry Castleman, Annie Thébaud-Mony, Bruno Pesce, Nicola Pondrano, Dr Daniela Degiovanni, Mayor Paola Mascarino, and Fernanda Giannasi. The attendance of the Italians had not gone unnoticed by Eternit's informers.

²⁷ Translated from Italian.