

12. THE MAKING OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM: DUST – THE GREAT ASBESTOS TRIAL

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The “Great Asbestos Trial” of the film’s title opened in Turin on December 10, 2009. At last, thousands of Italians whose families had been decimated by the ravages of asbestos diseases and surviving disease victims could see some hope of justice. In the course of the trial the prosecutor called for sentences of twenty years for key directors of the multinationals responsible for the release of lethal asbestos dust; more than six thousand injured parties sued for damages; lawyers from across Europe were empanelled to assist the prosecutor. “Great” was not an exaggeration; there had been no such trial greater.

With the commencement of the trial we were able to proceed with what would be the major part of our film. We had waited a long time – our project had been conceived in 2006 – but the families of victims had endured decades of delay. And they had done so with remarkable dignity and resilience. It was for them and the victims, whose daily struggle to salvage what they could of normal life during the brief time left to them was so poignant to watch, that the film was made.

In the beginning we were quite naïve. We thought, like most Europeans, that asbestosis and mesothelioma were diseases of the past; after all they were caused by exposure to asbestos fibres and the use of asbestos had been banned, hadn’t it? But research for the film showed us that the truth was just the opposite: the asbestos industry was still in full swing, particularly where economic activity is currently strongest – China, India, Brazil. In India, we discovered, asbestos use was rocketing.

This was a dilemma. Apart from covering the trial itself, we had intended to focus on the victims of Casale Monferrato, the municipality that had borne the brunt of the asbestos-disease onslaught in Italy, but now felt a responsibility to spread our net wider.

Seventy per cent of the world’s population lives in countries where asbestos consumption is a daily fact of life. We felt obliged to unveil this dramatic reality to Western audiences. To do this, it was decided to film in two essential locations where awareness of the asbestos

hazard was at a far earlier stage than that in Europe. The production crew would explore the asbestos reality in Brazil, a key supplier, and India, the world’s biggest importer of asbestos.

In Brazil we found great differences between States and even regions within States with regard to asbestos regulations. The country, of course is vast, with a wide range of ethnic groups and cultures. However, it possesses only one asbestos mine, so we decided to head to the remote area where it was situated. Conditions at the chrysotile asbestos mine in Minaçu, the biggest one in Latin America, presented no health hazard to the workers according to the company, the company doctor, the representative of the company’s trade union and the local institute that represents the asbestos industry. And yet, members of the Brazilian Association of Asbestos Victims (ABREA) and a Senior Labour Inspector documented the horrific impact exposure to asbestos has had on Brazilian workers. Indeed, Labor Inspector Fernanda Giannasi said that the wording of the labels on asbestos-cement roofing panels which warned workers handling these products not to breathe in the hazardous fibres was an absurdity.

In India, we were denied access to many asbestos-cement factories, but finally gained entry to a facility owned by Visaka Industries, a major producer of asbestos-cement roofing. We were also granted an interview with Dr. G. Vivekanand, Vice Chairman of Visaka Industries, medical doctor and a Member of Parliament, who told us that the conditions at his factory were perfectly safe. Throughout our trip to India, we observed broken pieces of asbestos-cement panels littering the countryside and slums and encountered a widespread ignorance about what asbestos is and the hazard it represents to human health.

At the Turin trial, the accused – Swiss tycoon Stephan Schmidheiny and the Belgian Baron Louis de Cartier de Marchienne – were notably absent in person but represented by a phalanx of lawyers and advisers. However, the number of these individuals was dwarfed by the throng of relatives of victims that we saw filling the courtroom on each trial day (the hearings initially being held weekly, on Mondays, then, towards the end of the

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court proceedings, twice weekly). We filmed them stoically making their way to court by bus, many in their eighties, determined to see justice for those in their families whose lives had been needlessly cut short.

Wilfully causing an environmental disaster is one of the charges levelled against the defendants. Well school headmistress Luisa Minazzi knew what that meant. As we filmed her going about her daily life, watching her brave determination to live being battered by the unremitting advance of her mesothelioma we saw only towards the end her optimism waver. In the film she represented the thousands in Italy, probably millions worldwide, who had travelled this same road. But she was our friend, the loss personal.

The trial told us about the beginnings and the end of Eternit in Italy. In the early days the foreign capitalists had been welcomed. Hard and unpleasant as the work was in the Casale factory, it still paid better than other employment in the area. But then we heard from workers and heroic union figures who had led action to combat the rising tide of disease, first in the factory then in the wider community. They told of the ever more frequent death notices posted at the factory gates. Now their employers were charged – in addition to causing an environmental disaster – with wilfully and knowingly neglecting safety rules. Workers at the factory in the early days saw little evidence of any safety precautions. We found some archive footage, which we incorporated into the film, showing the totally unprotected exposure of workers to vast quantities of fibres.

As the trial progressed we became convinced, in our

own minds, that the use of asbestos by Eternit in its Italian plants (Casale Monferrato, Rubiera, Bagnoli, Siracusa and its subsidiaries in Cavagnolo and Oristano) was consciously criminal. We interviewed international experts who documented Eternit's strategy for manipulating public opinion and influencing official policy, not only in Italy but worldwide. Eternit's public relations campaign was, we were told, so successful that no one questioned the company's timetable for phasing out asbestos technology in Italy. No one knows how many lives the delay in ending asbestos-cement production in Italy has cost.

The whole of Western Europe has now banned asbestos – Italy as long ago as 1992, six years after the closure of the Casale Eternit plant. Why has the European experience not had more impact on Asian and Latin American asbestos policies? With limited overseas screen time available this is not a question we could address in full, but it is hoped that the audience will be able to gain some insight into this wider question, when viewed against the backdrop of the tragic recent history of Casale revealed in the film.

The documentary will be shown on major television networks in Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and France in November 2011 as well as at international film festivals and on other TV channels in 2012. As filmmakers, we hope that our work will reach millions of people. They will be the ones to consider the evidence and make their judgment as to the guilt or innocence of asbestos executives past and present.

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Photo from documentary: Dust - the Great Asbestos Trial

A milestone in the trial. AFeVA supporters gather outside the Turin court after the last hearing before the summer break of 2010.