

5. THE ETERNIT FACTORY AT CASALE MONFERRATO

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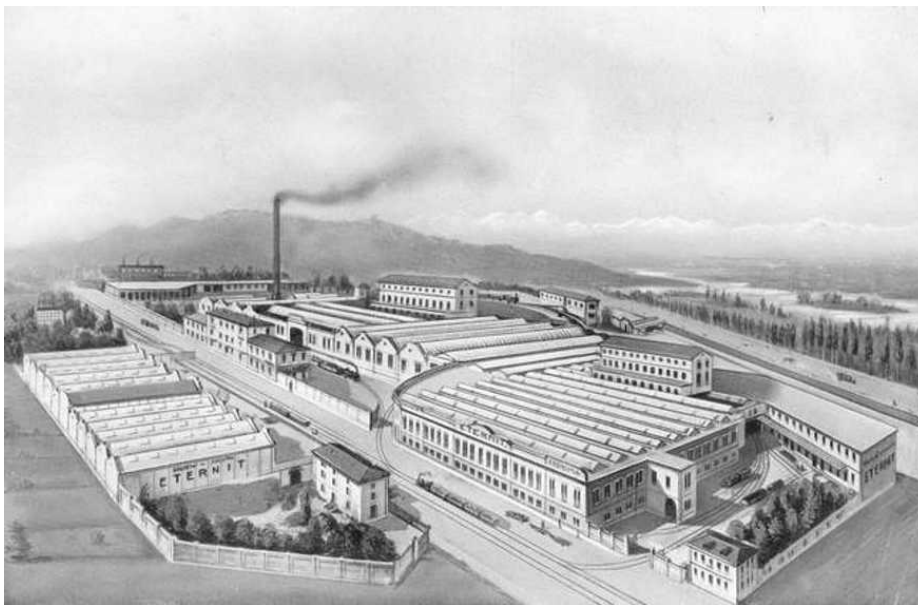
The Eternit factory was built in Casale Monferrato, in the North of Italy, in 1906. Progress and modernity broke into the secular rhythms of the Monferrato hills and countryside, which were made of poverty, starvation, wrinkles and hard work under the sun. The location was perfect for an asbestos cement plant: in a territory famous for its clay, a necessary ingredient for cement production, and 100 km from Balangero, the site of the largest chrysotile asbestos mine in Western Europe.

It was a modern structure that opened up unexpected employment opportunities. In a world that had known emigration as the only alternative to destitution it was the “American dream” at home: a well-paid job with set working hours which also left time to take care of the garden or the small vineyard, a stable future for the kids – no longer the necessity to slave in the fields or the marl mines. Eternit was the very image of man’s victory over nature: it produced only a limited range of products, but had created “artificial stone.”

Leaflets publicized uses for the marvellous new fibrecement in henhouses, hutches, prefabricated houses,

iceboxes, pre-fabricated schools and gyms, etc., and, of course, all of them accompanied by the adjective “rational,” a real password to the future. In Monferrato, everything that was “Eternit” was “good”: the children used waste product from the plant to build their tree houses, the adults to mark off the borders of their gardens or level their backyards. Sacks full of scrap, so-called “polverino” (dust), the most dangerous to one’s health, were given away free, to be used indiscriminately, as a reward for workers undertaking work already known to be dangerous to health.

The workers did piecework as was common in other cement factories in the area and in the mines in the hills; they were hired by the day and often waited hours for work, and this way their working day was incredibly extended. However, at the beginning of the century, work – whether in a factory, in a mine or on the land – could be compared to the labours of a beast of burden. Society was divided into two main categories: a well educated elite, which held the power, and a mass of ignorant and subdued people who could only count on their own strength and long hours of hard work, which combined meant exhaustion.



Stylized image of the Casale Monferrato Eternit plant in the 1920s. AFeVA archive.

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The elite could not only read and write they also spoke the national language. By contrast, the mass of manual workers were for the most part illiterate and communicated in dialects not recognized outside their local area: viewed by the elite as work animals with no language, but expletives, whispers or curse words. Today it doesn't seem believable that such a separation was justified by unquestioned anthropological beliefs. The elite assumed intellectual and spiritual superiority since the weary masses were regarded as being inherently stupid with no perception of a spiritual life. But along with the introduction of paid work in industry, came a sense of worth for the workers. The working-class felt like a bearer of values and for a while thought it was contributing with its own work to the construction of a better world for the future.

There was then a special kind of pride in working in a factory, a pride now consigned to the realms of industrial archaeology. This growing sense of being “a producing class” led workers to question the division of traditional society, though there was no real change in the division of labour until the 1960s, in Italy. The older generations that worked side by side with the younger ones, even in the 1960s and 1970s, retained a sense of reverence toward the elite that commanded them, ready to call them “gentlemen” with a certain respect, recognizing a condition that they thought to overthrow (not destroy) only in their dreams.

Those who worked at the Eternit factory, however, felt privileged compared to those who had to slave in the fields, who were already old when they turned forty or who rotted hunched in the mines. Never mind if doing the factory job they could die. They accepted death with the same resignation with which they were born. Whatever happened, they “the beasts” could expect to die before their time. It didn't really matter to them if it was the “polvere” (dust) that accelerated the process. They said they would have died anyway, that was all. At most, people spoke generically about diseases. Usually the diagnosis for Eternit labourers was acute exacerbation of chronic bronchitis, the heavy smokers' illness. They also spoke about cancer, but they normally associated the illness with their job – an existential condition. One works, gets sick and then dies. In a field, in a mine or in a factory; it didn't really matter.

Actually, getting ill because of work could be a source of pride, like an award for bravery: “I have the ‘polvere,’ you know,” like a confession shouted with dignity, as if “dust in the lungs,” on top of giving you the right to extra pay and hope for an early retirement, was also the mark of one who worked hard and strived and sweated to earn a living.

By contrast, the Eternit “owners” represented the prototype of contemporary capitalism. In the 1980s, the Schmidheiny family owned Eternit factories in 16 countries with more than 23,000 workers, and an annual income of around 2 billion Swiss francs. For three generations the Schmidheiny's strived to show themselves as deeply animated by a sense of duty comprising those ingredients that, according to Weber, combine the capitalist spirit with Calvinist ethics. However, seemingly following the principle that “money has no smell” many of their actions were at odds with any moral code: their economic success in Nazi Germany thanks to Hitler's help, the use of a concentration camp for forced labour in the Berlin Eternit factory, the exploitation of black workers treated like slaves in the South African mines during apartheid, or the way in which they got the chance to rebuild Nicaragua with asbestos cement after the country was destroyed by the civil war and the earthquake in 1976, with the financial help of future dictator Somoza.

Even the last representative of the dynasty, Stephan Schmidheiny, now on trial in Turin, is a worthy heir: he starts his career very early running Everite, the South African factory, in the worst years of apartheid. When he takes control of the whole company, in 1975, Schmidheiny is only 28, but already an astute businessman.

By 1991 Schmidheiny had disposed of Eternit's asbestos mines and many factories that made asbestos products, hoping to walk away from responsibility for the catastrophic damage that he and his family's company had caused through the years. The Italian Eternit company, in which the Schmidheiny family had a substantial shareholding, in addition to their control of policy, and in which the Belgian Baron de Cartier de Marchienne was an executive director, and the Belgian Eternit a major shareholder, finally declared bankruptcy in 1986. The Casale Eternit plant was abandoned with all its poisonous contents and the last 350 workers lost their jobs. Shortly afterwards, Schmidheiny changes his image and retires to start writing books about the environment and green economy like a perfect anti-globalization farmer. He has been UN Representative for Sustainable Development, a Clinton adviser, professor of economics at several universities, founder of the Swatch company, a shareholder of UBS and Nestle; but most importantly, he is one of the richest men on the planet.

It is an indisputable fact that Schmidheiny finally switched to non-asbestos production, but he did so really slowly, claiming for years that there was no material that could replace asbestos. Even though govern-

ments were worried about increasing public awareness of the dangers of asbestos, the influence of the asbestos industry was strong enough to delay European asbestos bans – 1992 in Italy, 1993 in Germany, 1996 in France – despite the mounting evidence provided by health professionals.

The strategy adopted in the last ten years of asbestos cement production in Casale was for Eternit to apparently cater to workers' concerns by improving working conditions, thus creating the image of a caring company. Yet it denied that asbestos caused mesothelioma for years and dismissed as subversive, union battles in defence of workers' health. What has come to light at the trial in Turin is that Eternit concealed evidence of the hazards of asbestos and hired a public relations agency to monitor and investigate the activities of unionists, anti-asbestos activists and prosecutors.

The workers knew very well, however, that working conditions were terrible and that they risked their health – they had known this for the best part of a century. Most of the women worked in the moulding department, shaping and cutting the various products made there by hand. “We used to wear a ‘foulard’ on our hair so that it didn’t get covered with too much of that white dust.” Wagons full of sacks of asbestos arrived at the railway station in Casale; then the wagons had to be unloaded manually onto carts which were then taken to the processing departments. The asbestos was stored in very high silos and taken later from the silo doors by pitchforks, to be processed.

Then there were the machines used to separate the fibres prior to being amalgamated with cement, fed with raw asbestos by hand. It was said that even the vineyards around the factory were white because of the dust.

Till the early sixties the initiatives taken by the unionists inside the factory were restricted to making requests that the management was inclined to perceive as “deliberately aggravating,” that is, pressing for masks, filters, fans and any other form of protection from that dust. Usually, the solution to these annoying people was the “Kremlin,” the department with the harshest and unhealthiest conditions, the place where unionized workers ended up: it was a department for the finishing of tubes, with piles of turnings and very low ceilings. Dust filters were installed toward the end of the sixties, but that just displaced the danger: in fact, at night the filters were opened and the wind carried the dust over the town.

In the sixties, public opinion supported the factory because it had brought jobs and money for many families:

industrial action could only monetize injuries, but even this was appreciated by the workers who accepted the risk in order to guarantee the future welfare of their children. “Why did it take us so long to find out that asbestos is carcinogenic? Because of anti-union, anti-worker and anti-communist bias. In Casale, only some doctors and few people from the environmental association were on our side” says Bruno Pesce.

The idea of “closing the factory” was seen as a crazy plan that would lay thousands of jobs on the line; it would have meant cancelling that “American dream at home” that Eternit represented. Thus, in pressing for action, the union had to overcome both the distrust of the workers who didn’t want to risk their jobs, and the hostility of local people who did not want to support a commitment against the main economic resource of the area. However, this attitude changed when people started dying systematically, even men and women who had never had anything to do with the factory.

In 1988, the “Associazione esposti all’amianto” (Association for people exposed to asbestos) was founded in Casale; this was later changed to “Associazione Vittime” (Victims Association), when not only the correlation between asbestos and mesothelioma was proved, but also that mortality in Casale was much higher than in the rest of Italy.

However, even when confronted with this dark scene of deaths and asbestos-related cancer, there were still people arguing that the most important consideration was to defend capitalism – the bringer of wealth, comfort and progress; though capitalism and its guiding principle – free trade – imply a series of conditions that had been disregarded by the Belgian-Swiss multinational.

Free trade must be based on democracy; if it is to be truly free, it must support freedom of information and expression. Now, manipulating information, silencing the voices of scientific research, spreading false rumours passed off as scientific data, disseminating publications and providing training courses for architects and engineers to encourage them to use asbestos instead of traditional materials – that is not behavior that follows the guiding principles of capitalism.

If in the light of Selikoff’s findings in the 1960s, linking occupational asbestos exposure to lung disease, Eternit had switched to the production of non-asbestos fibre cement, the company would not have gained such an advantageous position in the construction industry. And Stephan Schmidheiny would probably not have become one of the richest men on Earth.



Photo from documentary: Dust - the Great Asbestos Trial

In Casale Monferrato nowadays, in the area that was dominated for a century by the Eternit “factory of death,” there is a large expanse of concrete with just a few remnants of buildings – funereal industrial archaeology. This is the result of a unique decontamination process following the closure of the factory in 1986 and demolition in 2006; a task requiring enormous effort from local institutions since no help was forthcoming from the manufacturers that had profited from asbestos-cement production in Casale for 80 years (an estimated 23 million tons of asbestos cement was produced in Casale).

Since the end of the seventies, the period for which reliable figures are available, around 1,700 people from Casale Monferrato have died from asbestos-related diseases. Moreover, it is estimated that until 2030 almost 50 inhabitants of Casale Monferrato will die every year from such diseases, the majority from mesothelioma. It is a disaster comparable to Chernobyl in that, for many years now, asbestos-related diseases have struck down citizens and ex-Eternit workers, indiscriminately.

In Europe alone, a person dies of an illness directly caused by exposure to asbestos every five minutes. According to a European Union study, by 2030, around half a million victims of asbestos-related diseases are expected in Europe.

The same cynical and ruthless capitalism experienced by the people of Casale Monferrato, with such tragic consequences, remains in other countries, to which asbestos cement production was transferred. The industry is still using the same arguments in these countries that we heard so long ago: that “scientific” studies demonstrate the safety of white asbestos, that “controlled use” is safe use, that incorporation into a cement matrix renders lethal asbestos fibres harmless. No doubt prices have been kept low, by minimizing production costs, turning a blind eye to parameters of safety and environmental protection, and not prioritizing workers’ health and rights. However, we in the West are not supposed to care about this, or the fact that asbestos production is rising: it is now being used far away – in China, India, Vietnam....

Asbestos products are cheaper than safer substitutes because the industry continues to operate hazardous production facilities with few, if any, health and safety measures and off-loads its liabilities for the diseases it causes onto the at-risk workers and communities. As it was in the 20th century in Italy, so it is today in many developing countries – workers paying with their lives for the privilege of working for asbestos companies.

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