

Herr Stephan Schmidheiny, guten Tag.

Herr Stephan Schmidheiny, good morning.

I am using what little knowledge I retain from my schooldays and address you in your mother tongue because words are, or can be, a first approach, expression of being willing to meet. I believe in the power of words as a powerful tool for dialogue.

I am writing you this open letter, Herr Schmidheiny because I hope we can start a dialogue. Indeed, to offer *you* the opportunity for dialogue.

The German I learnt at school goes no further, but the meaning of my short opening in your language corresponds to my outstretched hand. I am crying, but with no resentment. I have never allowed it to grow even from my deepest grief.

I am from Casale Monferrato. I am an asbestos widow. I am a journalist. I am full of tears for the many, many people who have been scarred and who are still afflicted by that terrible disease that science says asbestos fibres cause. Someone, called this illness that afflicted him and which he faced with anguish, resignation and yet with great dignity – as a sort of ‘Casale’s Star of David’.

Much has been said, much has been written, much has been debated over time, along the decades!

Knowledge has evolved in conferences and trials, legal and scientific reasoning has been modified, refined, evolved, and questions of law and principle have been reviewed.

Prevention and decontamination have improved and have been perfected.

The steps of medical research have advanced to eliminate this dreadful evil – as ‘democratic’ as it is unjust, devious, and harmful – which, in some of my many articles and reflections, I have called the evil stepchild of asbestos. That is *Mesothelioma*.

Fifteen years have passed since the beginning of the Eternit 1 Maxi-trial, for wilful disaster, which saw Herr Schmidheiny as the defendant, and which ended with a long sentence, confirmed on Appeal, and then swept away by the Court of Cassation on a technicality (the statute of limitations). Then another trial was held for the murder of hundreds of people, this one known as Eternit Bis, in June of 2023, ended with a guilty verdict. Now there will be an appeal, then another Cassation.

In the meantime, however, other victims have been added to that long list. This means there could be an Eternit *ter*, and *quater*. In the meantime, others fall ill, and suffer, and die, and all of us, really all of us, you know, live with the fear when affected by an insidious cough or a trivial backache or a sneaky exhaustion.

And, in the end, who wins? I am horrified of the question. Because the only answer – for me, for my people, for people all over the world who suffer from mesothelioma, but also for you, yes, for you too – is this: you will only win if you are healthy.

This disease, let's face it without sugarcoating it, is rotten. It is disgusting. It is perverse. It is treacherous. It is difficult. It is bad. Yes, b-a-d. It keeps us all on edge Even you, as you well know. I remember reading that your youthful experience in an asbestos plant in Brazil means you too do not sleep soundly; you cannot feel safe. The evil-generating fibre is silent and patient: it lies there inside us, it relaxes, sleeps and broods, even for fifty years and more, until one day, it starts to dance. And will never stop dancing, drunk with evil, until the end.

We must stop it, Herr Schmidheiny. We must make your wicked stepson harmless.

We must find a way. And, so far, we have not found it. Even though many – scientists, researchers, doctors – have tried and continue tirelessly to try, by trial and error, by intuition. Everyone does a small, precious, and conscientious part, hoping that one day, the little pieces will fit together.

But days go by, and other people develop the disease, suffer, die. Do you know what that means, Herr Schmidheiny? That, while they are engaged in a wonderful project of life, of work, of love for their family and friends, of travel, of discoveries, of breathtaking sunrises and sunsets, of snow-capped cloisters and amazing swells they get bludgeoned to death. A sharp blow.

It's a knockout, Herr Schmidheiny. It pierces like lightning and thunder. It stuns to such a degree that the whole project suddenly flips and is forced, to reposition itself, to relocate its shortness of breath and to concentrate in a smaller, smaller, sometimes very short living space. How big is the reduced, smaller, very short space when you see your point of arrival? You destroy papers that were important a moment ago and, suddenly, you no longer need them. You sort things out, that's what they say... you leave your business and the assets you accumulated with work and pride, you detail your will. You begin to say goodbye to the people you love, friends, places... things a little less because they become meaningless, you make a few recommendations, you cling to good memories that, fortunately, are robust and console. A little, perhaps.

Now, Herr Schmidheiny, what do we do? Do we keep chasing from one trial to the next?

I admire and am very grateful to the men and women of the law who have tried and are trying, through the noble instrument of justice, to investigate, understand and bring to light how this tragedy could have happened, with a trail whose end we cannot see. I admire them, yes, because they forced us – starting with the proud and courageous community to which I belong – to rebel against evil without resigning ourselves.

Documents, testimonies, reconstructions, stories, and fates that have tested our dignity, our resilience: that which, as the philosopher Umberto Galimberti reminds us, was once called fortitude and metaphorically lodges in the heart, the excellent treasure chest of our feelings. I admire them, the men and women of law, because, in a tight confrontation on opposing sides, calling out in support: I admire the most authoritative and honest scientists, who shed light on this tragedy which, otherwise, would have been even aggravated and humiliated by neglect.

But now the question is: how long will the aftermath of this drama unfold?

Let us look at things realistically. You, right now, have a sentence hanging over your head. We are here awaiting the appeal process, but there could be other trials. So what? Oh, you will be well defended by your lawyers and advisors (I have met them and listened to them: they are good and knowledgeable), but your name – and you know it – will remain tied to these untimely, unfair deaths.

Your name will remain dishonourably linked to the word of asbestos, mesothelioma.

Can you bear this burden until the end of your days? Better still, can you bear to pass this burden on to your heirs?

Yet there is an alternative. It is called restorative justice.

This is my personal appeal. Hear me out, please.

There has always been the possibility of coming out of one's defensive stronghold and proposing – with humility, intelligence, and courage – a restorative solution. It was not necessary to enshrine it in law. Now, in addition, this possibility is formally introduced as an organic discipline: it provides for the parties – in this case, your interlocutors are those representing the victim community – to meet and, with the help of a mediator, try and pursue a substantive and therapeutic peace.

Restorative justice is a challenge that starts with a simple and clear question: what can be done to repair the harm done?

Mr. Schmidheiny, you can legitimately continue to defend yourself in the courtrooms through the people who defend by denying that you wanted to kill so many people. And in the courts – because that is where you will be able to defend yourself – each side will insist on its convictions and the judges will eventually decide. Once, twice, three times...

How many times? A hundred? A thousand?

But even if you manage to override judgments, convictions, acquittals, and statutes of limitations you will not succeed in denying facts: asbestos causes mesothelioma; you, Mr Schmidheiny, and your lineage, worked with asbestos in your companies, in Italy and elsewhere. So that asbestos has caused victims, has killed. This is not a judgement: it is a historical fact.

Don't you want to reverse this course? Come out of the fortress in which you have tried to shelter and accept the challenge that goes beyond giving a handful of millions of euros. The challenge is to design positive and shared, ethical, and realistically concrete actions to heal, to save. What could be more concrete than finding a cure? 'The' cure?

We have all seen, in the case of covid, that by investing and concentrating more resources in research, the result arrived promptly. Lives were saved, Mr Schmidheiny? Thousands of lives, of all ages: yours, mine, those of our children and grandchildren.

Why not also try this scourge that is mesothelioma? People do not die of mesothelioma just in Casale Monferrato, but all over the world. You are certainly not responsible for all the asbestos deaths in the world, but you can be responsible for their survival and recovery.

You will object: 'But what do I gain by accepting this challenge if, in any case, the trials against me continue?'

What do you gain for yourself, Mr Schmidheiny? You gain your conscience, your name and that of your descendants, your image that you care about, you gain in dignity.

I am convinced that in late life, when our physical strength wanes, the ability to probe one's consciousness more broadly and more deeply increases, you redefine priorities.

A commitment of honour, Herr Schmidheiny: make a commitment of honour with a wounded community that wants to heal.

Now is the time: promote research (through a pharmaceutical company) and ethical management until the shared goal is achieved: finding the right 'medicine'. You, as an entrepreneur, lead this activity.

I borrow a quote from a 'giant' of history: *Peace is its own reward* said Mahatma Gandhi. Let me extend it: peace making is its own reward.

It takes courage to take up the challenge. Now, not later. Lead the way, and others around the world and in other areas will follow. One day you may be remembered for this.

I renew my appeal to you on 'Asbestos Victims' Day' because then your voice will reach you louder.

My voice along with other voices will travel to every corner of the earth.

Even if I were left alone, I will continue to insist, not naive, but tenacious and confident, leaving no stone unturned.

Think about it now, do it now.

Auf wiedersehen, Herr Schmidheiny. Goodbye.

Silvana Mossano

Speeches related to the celebration of World Asbestos Victims Day on 28 April published in Silvana Mossano's blog (<https://www.silmos.it/>) on the dates in brackets:

- 1 – Dissertations on the Eternit trials (Friday, 26.4.2024)
- 2 – Survey among Casale students on climate change (Saturday, 27.4.2024)
- 3 – Open letter to Stephan Schmidheiny (Sunday 28.4.2024)
- 4 – Awarding of the Eternot prize with names and photos of award winners (Tuesday, 30.4.2024)

World Asbestos Victims Day – Events in Casale Promoted by AFEVA the Association of Asbestos Victims and their Relatives

Sunday 28 April – 11.30 a.m. – Eternot Park

Laying of wreath and flowers at the foot of the Eternot Park plaque. On the initiative of AFEVA and the municipal administration of Casale, meeting with citizens.

Monday 29 April, from 9.30 a.m. to 1 p.m., at the Market

‘Vita a Impatto Zero’, performances and thematic workshops by the XXV Aprile primary school and the Liceo delle Scienze Umane of the Istituto Balbo Lanza.

Monday 29 April, 6 pm, Circolo Ronzone (via XX Settembre)

‘Morti In Progress’: a performance of theatre, song, and narration by Luca Maciacchini.

Tuesday 30 April, at 9.30 a.m., in the Council Chamber of the Municipality of Casale

Proclamation of the winners of the Eternot 2024 Prize.

Until 30 April, the podcast of the students Luca Cattaneo, Alessandro Ferrero, Gabriele Massaro, Diego Reale and Alessandro Vattiata of the 5BI of the Istituto Volta in Alessandria, winners of the 43rd edition of the ‘Contemporary History Project’ competition, announced by the Regional Council of Piedmont, will be available on the website of the Municipality of Casale. The podcast is entitled ‘Eternit. A deadly embrace’.

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