

SILVANA MOSSANO

Eternit Bis, 17 September 2021 hearing

"When I arrived in Casale, as Union Secretary in 1979, I immediately focused on Eternit, which was the biggest company in town, perhaps even in the province. Many workers were developing asbestosis, which was not considered particularly relevant at the time because it was not cancer. Do you know how people die of asbestosis? Suffocated," says Bruno Pesce. The then young trade unionist, already had years of experience in the Valenzano area¹. He was entrusted with the task of launching and organising the new leadership of the CGIL Union in Casale, in Piazza Castello, its traditional headquarters and where it was till a few years ago. "Dozens and dozens of them died, suffocated," he said yesterday morning, Friday 17th of September, at the Court of Assizes of Novara, presided by Chief Justice Gianfranco Pezzone (assisted by Judge Manuela Massino and the Jury – aka as popular judges), which is trying Stephan Schmidheiny, the living owner of Eternit. The defendant, represented by Astolfo di Amato and Guido Carlo Alleva, is accused of voluntary homicide, with possible wilfulness, of 392 people who died of mesothelioma, the cancer caused by asbestos.

MESOTHELIOMA, OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE

"At the end of the 1970s, people began to talk about mesothelioma, but some people did not even know how to pronounce the word," Pesce explained. Answering questions by Mariagiovanna Compare who is prosecuting the case with Gianfranco Colace, the witness retraced the trade union activity in Eternit which, from the early 1900s to its closure in 1986. The company employed thousands of employees. "Many lawsuits were filed for the occupational diseases which, up to a certain point, was mainly asbestosis". And not mesothelioma? "It was only in 1986 that INAIL² recognised mesothelioma as an occupational disease without it being 'mediated' by asbestosis: previously, if there was no previous diagnosis of asbestosis, mesothelioma in itself was not considered an occupational disease.

But let's take it step by step. Let's go back to the late 1970s. At the last hearing, Nicola Pondrano, who was an Eternit factory worker and was on the works council before becoming a union leader, told us about the battles for environmental health in the factory overlooking Via Oggero, in the Ronzone district.

PESCE AND PONDRANO

It was inevitable that the two - Pesce and Pondrano - would meet. One of those meetings that fate places in a precise moment because it changes the story.

"I knew that Pondrano was in the environment committee of the works council and I seconded him to the union. There was a very close symbiosis and collaboration between him and me. We promoted hundreds of cases for the recognition of occupational diseases. We were totally dedicated.

¹ [*Valenza Po is the goldsmiths' area a few miles from Casale, where Bruno Pesce worked before becoming a TU official and the local secretary*],

² (*the Government's Workers Compensation Agency*)

THE INAIL CASES

In 1981, "yes, when we discovered that Eternit had convinced INAIL that there was no more asbestos in the factory and therefore it was no longer required to pay the additional premium to the Workers' Compensation Fund. Let's face it: the company saved a few hundred million Euros (billion lire at the time) by not paying it to INAIL". And what was the impact of this? "Workers were no longer entitled to the so-called 'bridging pension for early retirement on medical grounds' (*rendita di passaggio*), to avoid their asbestosis getting worse, which corresponded to a year's salary. We were dumbfounded," said Pesce, with the same astonishment and dismay that he and Pondrano must have felt at the time. "We were amazed. Hence the appeals to the Industrial Court against Inail ('actually we had a grudge against Eternit, but technically the cases should have been brought against the Istituto Infortuni sul Lavoro- The Work related Accidents Agency ') which were practically all won. "I remember when Giovanni Demichelis went to testify in front of the magistrate Giorgio Reposo in Casale, he was already very seriously ill, he was brought into the courtroom on a stretcher and the judge had to get off the bench and put his ear to his lips to understand his words. But Demichelis was determined: 'I want to testify,' he insisted. He died of asbestos by the end of that week.'

The proceedings for the so-called *Bridging pension for early retirement on medical grounds* ' were those court appointed Professor Michele Salvini of Pavia University acted as a consultant. "Yes, he was the one who climbed up the ladder and found asbestos dust - there was none left in the factory! He didn't trust that all the shop-floors had been cleaned to a high standard before his inspection: the floor had been polished up, and they had been very good at that. Pesce offers a wry smile: "Excuse me," he tells the judges, "sometimes I use irony to avoid swearing.

THE DUST ON THE FOUNTAIN

The witness recalled that Professor Salvini, on his own initiative, had then gone to inspect other areas of the city, outside the factory, for example 'the fountain in Piazza Dante. There was asbestos there too'.

And how come the dust was also outside the factory? Pesce recalled a few examples: "The shredding of waste products that took place on the platform in the so-called Ex Piemontese area, almost opposite the factory, crushed in the open air with a caterpillar equipped with a bucket: the shredded materials were transferred to the factory by a truck to the Hazemag mill. One worker, Angelo Gnocco, told me that this system had been in operation from the late Nineteen Seventies until the factory closed down, even though production had decreased considerably in the end. And the fans ... that's exactly what they were," Pesce said, pointing to them when the prosecutors projected a historical photo on the screen, "they sucked the unhealthy air from inside and threw it out, and it floated into, and everyone breathed it in. And then there were the lorries that came and went: they carried the sacks of asbestos from the station to the factory via the city streets and, vice versa, they transported the finished products, pipes and sheets, from the factory to the station: they were open, no covering. And there was also the dust that people went to the plant to get. Did they pay for it?", says Ms Compare. "Someone said no, others said that they gave a 'donation', but not much" and it ended up lining their attics, courtyards, sports fields, even some churchyards". And the "little beach"? "Ah, that one, the "Canary Islands of Monferrato" called it, a crust that had formed

on the Po with the materials contained in the factory's waste waters. Families liked to go there in the summer, even for picnics. They said the beach was beautiful and smooth" and white.

"THAT'S THE DOOR".

And how did people react to all this? "The pay packet was important essential: in those years, environmental battles had to be combined with the priority of defending jobs. Changing jobs in the plant was not an option. I remember Giampaolo Bernardi, who was a maintenance worker. He went to talk to the Head of Personnel Carlo Oppezzo and said: "Change my job, maybe not immediately, maybe in a year, but give me a less dangerous job, you know, I have three children, I would like to see them grow up. Oppezzo, without looking up from his desk, simply said: 'Bernardi, you know where the door is'. Bernardi died of mesothelioma. And then I remember Anna Scaiola, she worked at Eternit for 31 years, she had an hour to breastfeed her child, and she didn't have time to take off her overall when she breastfed her daughter".

THE PLANT THAT WAS NEVER BUILT

Another recollection: "In 1981, I was stopped in front of the Union by a teacher, went by the surname of Patrucco, who said to me, 'what are you waiting for to close Eternit down? You see," I told him, "if I campaign to close the factory, it's no use, people want jobs. We were thinking of converting production. He had heard about a new plant in Strada Valenza: "As a trade union, we thought we would fight for the use of alternative fibres to asbestos, but then, no more was said about the new plant in Strada Valenza".

After Eternit's bankruptcy in 1986, "the Company's 'safe', that is the French Eternit, proposed to reopen in 1987, hiring between 50 and 70 workers out of the 350 who had been left home after the closure, but it would have continued to work with asbestos. There was a letter from 110 doctors who averted such an eventuality and, in December 1987, the then mayor Riccardo Coppo signed the famous ordinance banning the use of asbestos in the Municipality of Casale".

"In 1987, we started the lawsuits to obtain compensation from the bankruptcy for those who became ill and died. There was a criminal trial, in Casale, in 1993, but because of the time, the statute of limitations kicked in, except for one case.

THE PLANT WAS ABANDONED

In the meantime, the idle factory remained there, exposed to all weather conditions: "Left to the four winds, with tons of asbestos inside. In the years that followed, the reclamation was carried out by the public authorities, after a tug-of-war with the bankruptcy trustee to purchase the factory plant in order to clean it up properly and demolish it without further risk to the population.

It took a long time, and was a complex and bumpy ride, with international tenders, assignments, appeals and other hitches.

"Did Schmidheiny or any of the companies linked to him ever give any indication that he was willing to contribute to the clean-up operation? "No, no. The first money for the reclamation came from the Region, when Paolo Ferraris, from Casale, was councillor. His name, by the way, is among the 392 mesothelioma victims listed in the Eternit Bis trial.

"The Region also provided the resources allocated by the then councillor Sante Baiardi for the first epidemiological survey carried out by Benedetto Terracini and his collaborators between 1983 and 1987. He ascertained that, in the Casale area, there were hundreds of above-average asbestos-related deaths".

REMEDICATION AND HEALTH COSTS

It was always the public authorities that financed the reclamation of buildings and dust throughout the area.

The public money spent for this purpose, from 1996 to the present, in the "Site of National Interest of Casale" amounted to 120 million Euros: the current president of the Piedmont Region, Alberto Cirio, gave a detailed account yesterday in Novara, while the costs borne by the health system, and therefore the community, for the necessary treatment of each case amounted to 33,000 Euros for diagnostic and therapies, 25,000 Euros for insurance costs and 200,000 Euros for losses related to the loss of work.

The prosecutor insists: has anyone from the Eternit group come forward to contribute? "No, I am not aware of any contact," said Cirio.

AFLED AND THEN AFEVA

Pesce then recalled the founding of Afled (Association of families of deceased Eternit workers) in 1988, which became Afeva (Association of families and victims of asbestos) in 2000, because it was now clear that people were also dying of asbestos (and now they are almost all, because "Eternit workers are almost all dead," said the witness).

"If we could count them all, there are no fewer than three thousand deaths from mesothelioma, asbestosis and lung cancer," Pesce said.

'PICA' STORY

Members of the community who have never had anything to do with Eternit, such as Piercarlo Busto, a banker, the son of a high school teacher and a housewife, who lived in a fairly central area of the city died too. His sister Giuliana, the current president of Afeva, talked about him: 'He was a sports man, he didn't smoke, he was one hundred per cent healthy. He used to train on the Po embankment, next to Eternit. One day, during training, he felt a pain in his chest; then a little cough, fever, tiredness. He had an X-ray and they found water in his lungs. Only a little later, in Pavia, Professor Moncalvo, as soon as he heard that he was from Casale, immediately made the diagnosis: mesothelioma'. Giuliana Busto recalls those days in detail: 'I had never heard that word. I consulted a medical encyclopaedia, where it said it was cancer related to asbestos, so I said to myself 'but they're wrong, Pica has never touched asbestos, he works in a bank'. He died on December the 23rd, after five months of excruciating pain, and on Christmas Eve, instead of going to choose presents, we went to choose the coffin". On the funeral poster they wrote: "Killed by mesothelioma". "It was a slap in the face for the city, a shock, the awareness that asbestos spares no one began to make itself felt.

Giuliana Busto contacted the trade union after that tragedy, and joined Afled, which later became Afeva, and was a convinced activist, and has been its president since 2016. She replaced Romana Blasotti Pavesi and then Giuseppe Manfredi, with his deputy Giovanni Cappa, both of whom have died of mesothelioma since then.

The association has become a point of reference for patients and their families, a champion of all the social, health and propulsive battles on the front of the search for a cure, environmental remediation and judicial in the various processes, along with trade unions Cgil Cisl and Uil and institutions ("the municipality has always sided with us," said Pesce; "the Region will do everything in its power to make those responsible for these thousands of deaths pay, because life is an asset that must receive justice," assured Cirio).

Activism mobilised consciences, became shared and widespread, because mesothelioma spares no one, indeed it has raised its sights. It has gone from around twenty new patients a year (in the 1980s) to around fifty a year at present (2021, oncologist Daniela Degiovanni recently said, is the first year in which we seem to see the start of a downward phase in the number of new cases of the disease. Perhaps the peak has been reached and are we starting to go downhill?).

"WE HAD A SPY AMONG US"

Little by little, anyone in need and anyone who wanted to cooperate found the door of the association open. "Even the spy. Can I talk about it?" asked the witness Pesce cautiously. Say, say, the prosecutors pressed.

"A certain Cristina Bruno, she was a chartered accountant and freelance journalist, and for a certain period she had also been our Flm's (Metalworkers' Union) press officer. She was insistent, nagging. I was the secretary of Union and I had to put up with her more than anyone else. "What are you doing? When do the lawyers come? How do you set up the cases? I'd like to attend your meetings, I'm one of you". She was asphyxiating, but we were far from thinking that she was an informer, an 'antenna' as she was called, on Schmidheiny's payroll. It turned out that she had been paid invoices for information services from 1984 onwards through the Bellodi public relations agency in Milan. As far as I know, she was then struck off the Register of Journalists'.

CASH PAY-OFFS

Before the start of the Eternit Uno maxi-trial in Turin, Schmidheiny's emissaries contacted Afeva's lawyers to propose a compensation settlement: 30,000 euro to the families of the victims who had, in exchange, waived their right to sue as plaintiffs; at the same time, 20,000 euro were added to that figure, deposited in a specific account for medical-scientific research. "But did the Afeva association also receive a sum for each individual offer?" asked lawyer Di Amato, Schmidheiny's defence counsel. Pesce replied: 'Yes, we were recognised something for the procedures between citizens and Schmidheiny's company to follow the steps of these transactions. Transactions that I think were too small to be called compensation... 30,000 euro for a person's life... And the money allocated to Afeva for these transactions has always been spent on activities in support of the fight against asbestos. He recalls the days of that proposal: "We did not sleep for a few nights - recalled the witness - for us it was important to do the trial that was about to begin after the hundreds of complaints that we had submitted to the Prosecutor's Office of Turin in 2004 and bring many

plaintiffs: this was, and is, our goal of justice. But we had been told clearly by Schmidheiny's emissaries who contacted our lawyers that if we had not done this mediation as an association, the company would have done it anyway with its own representative. Well, we preferred to explain to our people what the situation was. There were widows who, out of necessity, accepted, crying...".

The next hearing on Monday September the 20th

Next Monday's hearing in Novara: Piercarla Coggiola, manager of the Environment and Ecology Office of the Municipality of Casale, the current Mayor Federico Riboldi and Giovanna Patrucco, daughter of the Ronzone baker who died of mesothelioma