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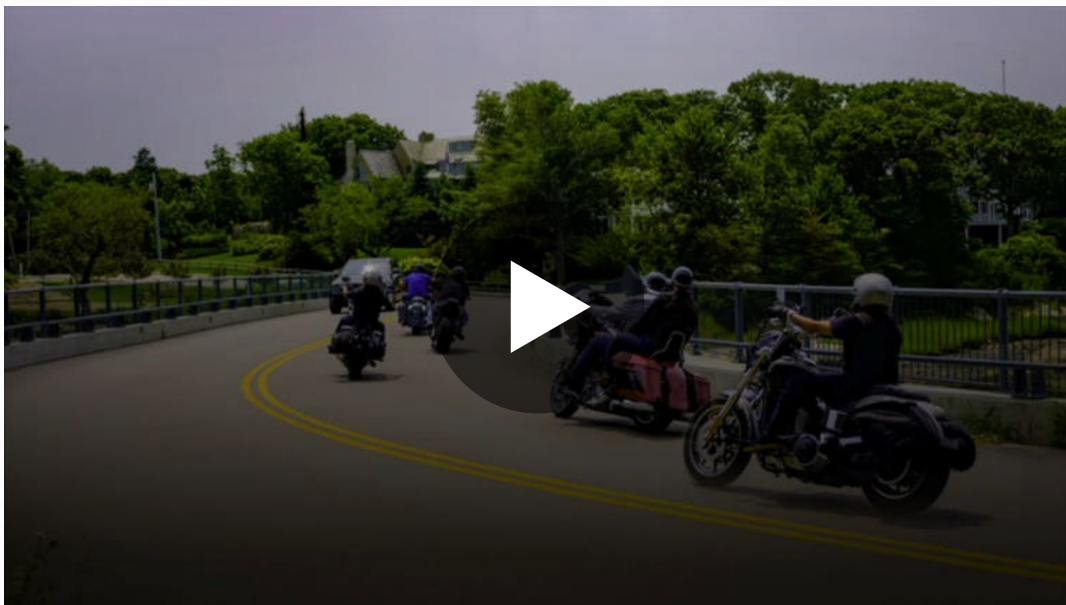
# Why Swiss Billionaire Stephan Schmidheiny Was Found Guilty Of Asbestos Deaths In An Italian Court—And What Will Happen Next

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A woman holds a sign reading "Stephan Schmidheiny your place is in jail" during the trial of ... [+] AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

This past Wednesday, Swiss billionaire [Stephan Schmidheiny](#)—the heir to a construction materials group that he sold in the 1980s—was convicted on charges of aggravated manslaughter in the deaths of more than a hundred people tied to asbestos exposure and sentenced to 12 years in prison by a jury in an Italian court.

The development comes after nearly 20 years of legal proceedings against the Swiss Eternit Group’s factories in Italy, which were sold by Schmidheiny in 1986, and which are alleged to have exposed workers and residents to asbestos. That exposure was associated with a large number of deaths due to mesothelioma and other asbestos-related illnesses, the prosecutors claimed. The manslaughter conviction places blame on Schmidheiny—as former owner of the factories- for the deaths of 147 residents of the town of Casale Monferrato and factory employees there.

A spokesperson for Schmidheiny, who maintains his innocence, says she will appeal the verdict. A statement from his lawyer labels the conviction a “miscarriage of justice” and also claims that the verdict violates Italian law. In an email with *Forbes*, Schmidheiny’s spokesperson Lisa Meyerhans Sarasin spelled out multiple reasons why she believes the verdict is not legal, including double jeopardy. In 2014 the Italian Supreme Court quashed a 16-year sentence for Schmidheiny leveled in 2012 by a court in Turin, Italy over charges of the deaths of 3,000 people allegedly exposed to asbestos by Eternit building materials in Italy. She also noted that asbestos processing was legal in Italy until 1992, while the trial covered the period from 1976 to 1986.

According to Barry Castleman, an American chemical engineer and expert on the effects of asbestos exposure, who has worked closely with the prosecution team representing the Casale Monferrato victims, the number of those who died following exposure to asbestos in factories formerly owned by Schmidheiny is much larger than the verdict spells out.

“Those [147 deaths] are just the ones that were being brought to trial,” says Castleman, adding that the town of 35,000 people sees 40 to 50 deaths a year from asbestos-related illness. “The whole town has been devastated by this.”

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The conviction, in a court in Novara in the Piedmont region, marks the third in what have been dubbed the “Eternit bis” trials in Italy. The first two concluded in 2019 and 2022, in Turin and Naples, respectively; both ended with a conviction against Schmidheiny, almost immediately appealed by his team. Schmidheiny has not served time in jail because of the appeals process.

The statement from Schmidheiny’s representative says that since 2008 he has been providing compensation to former Eternit employees and residents of towns affected by the asbestos from his factories. According to the statement, more than 2,000 people have accepted the offer of support and compensation in the high double-digit millions has been paid out to victims of what is described as a “social tragedy.”



In Castleman’s opinion, this is not enough: “The whole idea of accountability; he’s never even apologized to the people in Casale. He’s never said he did anything wrong.”

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