

## *Preface*

I first learned of asbestos in 1982, when my husband developed the disease, mesothelioma, which in a few months led to his death. Mario worked at the Casale Monferrato Eternit factory, but none of the other victims in my family worked there: not my sister, my cousin, my nephew, nor my daughter Rosa who died within six months of diagnosis in 2004.

Since then my life has been dedicated to the fight against asbestos. Despite my 82 years I want to be at the forefront of the campaign that started in Casale during the late 1970s. I am president of the victims' association for our community: AFeVA. We have three priorities in our struggle: scientific research, decontamination and justice. Our aim is to restore the dignity of the suffering victims, and to ensure there will be no more asbestos victims in the future, neither in our area nor around the world.

It is important that we now take stock of our three decades of experience in the fight against asbestos. The many positive results of our struggle have been possible thanks to untiring groundwork by the CGIL union which was later supported by all segments of the broader civil society: medical doctors and environmentalists as well as a large part of the general population. The 18<sup>th</sup> annual competition for the "Cavalli" Award – featuring school projects on environmental health awareness – involved more than 1200 children from 40 schools; reassuring us that knowledge of the risks of asbestos exposure and of the tragedy we have suffered will endure in our locality in future years.

The beginning of the trial against the owners of the Eternit company in Turin on December 10th, 2009 led me to realize how far we had come in our quest for justice. This criminal case involves more than 1700 victims from our community, workers and citizens; for their killing, the Prosecutor calls for a sentence of 20 years.

But my reflections on our progress are tinged with bitterness; sentencing the culprits is not the end of the story, we need to continue our efforts. Research has not yet yielded the results we hoped for; even after three decades, patients are dying much as before: subject to the same inexorable fate, suffering the same pain, their survival limited by virtually the same timespan.

Thirty years after the peak of asbestos-cement production in Italy, and more than twenty years since the closure of the Italian Eternit plants, we're witnessing in Casale Monferrato a tragic continuance of new victims: over 40 per year in a town of 35,000 citizens. And they are ever younger; often parents with young children. I fear that local victims will continue to be numerous in the distant future if we don't dedicate ourselves fully to reversing this lethal trend.

Another source of bitterness concerns decontamination projects, for which resources are lacking. Although the factory itself was decontaminated (before finally being demolished in 2006), as have all public buildings in Casale, other restitution work remains uncertain; there is a lack of continuity and not all areas are treated equally.

In the early years of decontamination, operations were going ahead with more urgency and thoroughness. Many years have passed since then – it was 1995 when the greatest efforts were made – and we seem to have missed the opportunity to turn the practices adopted then into a standard for every contaminated area.

Despite the many deaths that we have already suffered we haven't yet learned how to solve the problem at its root, that we must make a daily commitment to *all* aspects of the fight against asbestos. We have thrown ourselves into the task of achieving the trial, with stubbornness and determination, for

so long, as have all the prosecutors who have set up the lawsuit, and with so much skill, consistency and humanity, to charge the Eternit owners with permanent environmental disaster. But this commitment is not enough: decontamination operations are stalled and scientific research is making slow progress. In addition, asbestos continues to be extracted and traded in many countries around the world, as if our direct experience of tragedy counts for nothing, cannot teach anything to those who today continue to expose others to asbestos.

Since the beginning of the trial, I hoped that our victims had not died in vain and that justice would be done. So far, the progress of the trial has given us great hope: Prosecutor Guariniello and his colleagues have inspired us with great confidence; while Judge Casalbore has always been respectful, with constant attention to every detail of the hearings. Despite the pain recalled by witnesses' words and the defence's arguments, our trust in justice has never left us.

Our battle is a battle for civil justice, not a request for economic compensation. The case against Eternit has been our battlefield, its result will have far and deep repercussions. We believe that, despite all the human and financial resources invested by the defendants to exculpate themselves, recognition of our suffering will lead to an exemplary sentence.

To all the victims of asbestos, and those living where it is still mined, processed and traded, I wish with all my heart that you can eradicate all traces of asbestos risk; and that you can do it with the same awareness and determination we had in Casale over the past thirty years. And I therefore hope that the peak achievement of our commitment, the international criminal trial in Turin, can become a common heritage for everyone working internationally to combat the scourge of asbestos.

To all those communities with which we feel intimately linked and with whom we share pain and fate, from Widnes in the UK, to Paray le Monial in France, from Sarnia in Canada to Osasco in Brazil and many others, go our thoughts and the friendly embrace of our association.



Photo from documentary: Dust - the Great Asbestos Trial.

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