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Maria Roselli The Asbestos Lie



Maria Roselli

Die Asbestlüge

Geschichte und Gegenwart einer
Industriekatastrophe

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An industrial disaster beyond comparison

For many years asbestos was considered to be a “miracle fibre.” The mineral was easy to mine and suitable for multiple uses. The fact that it is highly carcinogenic was for a long time denied and hushed up by the asbestos lobby. In her book “The Asbestos Lie” the Swiss journalist Maria Roselli (*1962) unravels the history of this industrial disaster.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), every year 100 000 people throughout the world die of illnesses caused by asbestos. This phenomenon is increasingly affecting the countries of the former Soviet Union, but also China and the emerging industrial nation of India.

How is it possible that more than one-hundred years after the first alarming medical findings this carcinogenic material can still be legally used and sold in most countries of the world? As with many issues, the present situation can only be understood if we look at the past. What is happening today in Asia, Latin America and Africa happened in exactly the same way fifty years ago in Europe, the cradle of the asbestos industry.

Swiss industry played an important role from the very beginning. Niederurnen, in the Canton of Glarus, was not only the headquarters of the Schmidheiny family’s Eternit Group, but for decades also constituted one of the international powerhouses of the asbestos cement industry: in the time of asbestos euphoria, the Schmidheiny’s holding, Amiantus AG, was in control of asbestos cement plants in 16 countries, employing a total of 23 000 workers.

More than that: as of 1929, the cartel of asbestos cement manufacturers, registered in the trade register under the name of Sociétés Associés d’Industries Amiante-Ciment (SAIAC), had its headquarters in the office building of the Eternit AG in Niederurnen. The first president of the SAIAC was Ernst Schmidheiny, owner of the Eternit AG, originating from the Rhine Valley in northeastern Switzerland. A particularly dark chapter in industrial history was written by asbestos cement manufacturers in Nazi Germany: These members of SAIAC sensed a potential for lucrative business in Berlin and during the Second World War exploited forced labourers. This is a particularly sad chapter in

the history of asbestos—and one that nobody cares to admit having been involved in.

However, the history of the abandon of asbestos industry in Switzerland is no less pathetic. Here, as late as 1978 the lobby of asbestos manufacturers founded an “Asbestos Working Circle” with the aim of preventing the mineral from being classified in the highest toxicity category. It is the merit of this “working circle”, but also a result of the hesitance of Swiss authorities, that in Switzerland asbestos was only banned at a time when it suited the industry.

The book by Maria Roselli includes statements by Anders Holte, CEO of today’s Eternit AG in Niederurnen, and Franz Steinegger, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Swiss accident insurance, SUVA, with regard to the asbestos scandal. However, for once a voice is also given to the victims: Swiss and migrant workers, as well as a woman forced to work for the German DAZAG under the Nazi regime and a black “worker” in the former Apartheid nation of South Africa give their accounts of this gigantic industrial disaster.