

International Workers' Memorial Day, 28 April 2023

## A testimony of family members of victims of asbestos from Slovenia

Our family comes from a village near towns Kanal and Anhovo in the valley of the river Soča, where at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Anhovo cement factory was built due to the nearby rich deposits of marl. At the time this territory was part of Italy. Already at a relatively early stage the owners of the cement factory realised that the production of cement articles containing asbestos might prove to be a profitable side-line. Initially, both production lines were small-scale, but after the Second World War, and especially after the new cement factory Salanit Anhovo was built, the demand for asbestos articles increased enormously. We keep at home a brochure issued at the occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the cement factory with data indicating and celebrating the increase of asbestos production.

As is to be expected the surrounding population heavily depends for employment on such a large company. As most people in the area came from small farms that could not fully support their families, in the beginning mostly men chose to seek employment at the Salanit cement factory. Our grandfather was the first of our ancestors to work in the cement factory up till his retirement. In 1995 he was diagnosed with mesothelioma of the pleura and died less than a year later. Our mother got a job in the cement factory immediately after finishing high school and worked in the company chemical laboratory until her death. My father was mainly as a welder involved in the construction of the new cement factory in the 1970s. The new cement factory was, of course, at the time mainly constructed with asbestos contained building materials - especially corrugated sheets for the external cladding of the buildings.

It was mostly our mother who told us how asbestos was handled at the Salanit Anhovo cement factory in that period. She was a trade union shop stewardess at the factory. When the wave of asbestos illness cases soared in the mid-1990s, she was actively involved in regulating the status of the asbestos victims. We remember her telling us that, as a young employee, she and her colleagues used to rest during their lunch break on a pile of asbestos that was kept in the chemical laboratory. And how, at one point, workers noticed skull pictogram on packaging of Canadian asbestos. And how awareness of the hazard of asbestos was slowly spreading among workers. The workers generally believed that the physicians at the cement factory health center must have known at least something about the asbestos hazard but were unwilling or not allowed to speak out. It was only after declaration of independence of state Slovenia in 1991 that information on asbestos hazard became common knowledge – anyway, at that time number of morbidity and mortality cases among workers already soared. By the time that asbestos production in Slovenia was banned on 20 December 1996, it was already clear to everybody that it was a substance very dangerous to health. It should be also noted that workers also brought asbestos into their homes on their work clothes and on the jute asbestos packaging and on the felt used in production of asbestos sheets. The packaging and the felt they, namely, often reused on their farms.

Following the ban on asbestos in Slovenia, a systematic programme was launched to assess individual worker exposure to asbestos and to address their social status through early retirement and compensation to the sickest ones. In this screening programme, asbestos was found in the lungs of both our grandfather and our mother. Our father, who at the time was no longer employed at the cement factory, was not included in the screening programme. We do not remember whether it was his decision or whether he dropped out because he was no longer an employee of the cement factory.

At that time the impact of lung cancer or pleural mesothelioma on the victim's health was already known. The confirmation of asbestos found in the lungs had a major psychological impact on the victim and the family. From that moment on, it was only a matter of time before some kind of disease would break out.

Until 2014, our mother lived without any problem. In the 1990s, immediately after presence of asbestos in her lungs was confirmed, she quit smoking. Then she felt pain in her back and an examination at Golnik Hospital for Lung Diseases confirmed water accumulation in her lungs. As we were acquainted with the diagnoses of other victims, we were waiting for confirmation of pleural mesothelioma hoping that it might not be what it was most likely to be. After the diagnosis was confirmed, she was given all the care she needed, and alternative treatments were sought, including abroad. But life expectancy of these patients is less than a year, so the sufferer and those close to her have mixed feelings of hope, hopelessness, and disbelief. Last days before death of patients in palliative care are everyway psychologically exhausting.

A year after our mother's death, also our father felt pain in his back, and tests showed that he already had bone metastases and that he too had pleural mesothelioma. Alongside conventional treatment we tried to arrange immunotherapy treatment for him in Heidelberg, Germany. The most striking aspect of visit at that hospital was the doctor's question as to whether our father was aware of the seriousness and incurability of the disease. The answer was, of course, yes. The hospital in Heidelberg carried out all the tests and, a good three months later, announced that treatment could be attempted. But by then our father was already dead.

Facing a diagnosis that offers little hope of getting better was extremely mentally exhausting for both parents and the whole family. The time leading up to death was practically nothing but taking farewell, and death was ultimately redemption from torment we had to endure.

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