

RAMAZZINI DAYS 2011

WORK OF THE FELLOWS ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

A DEADLY ASBESTOS FAMILY SAGA

Pier Giorgio Natali, MD, PhD, Regina Elena National Cancer Inst. Rome University “G. d’Annunzio”,
Chieti, Italy
natali@ifo.it

“Asbestos dust was all over the room as grey snow: books left on the table, when removed, left their negative image“ writes Primo Levi in his book “The Periodic Table”, describing his working conditions when temporarily employed as a chemist in an asbestos mine in northern Italy in 1941. Hard to believe, what Levi described was the home environment where the children of Philippe S. and his wife L., three boys and a girl, grew up in Patrimonio, a small village in Cape Corse overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Wrapped in the wild scents of the Mediterranean bushes of liquorice, myrtle, fennel and rosemary spread by frequent winds, the village is split by the main road which connects the west to the east coast of Cape Corse, where the busy harbor of Bastia is located. Since the late forties, the village was crossed daily by tens of trucks. They were carrying cracked asbestos rich rocks from the open sky mine of Canari, sited 30 km north of Bastia, to be shipped mainland to the fast growing French industry “Eternit”. As proudly commented by a contemporary chief inspector (Docteur G.M.) of the local Social and Public Health Affairs Office “the mine provides almost 100% of asbestos nationally and represents about 25% of continent production”. Philippe and his wife had set up a successful family business, he being a reliable butcher and she, an unmatched cook of succulent “figatelli” (medium roasted pork liver seasoned with laurel leaves, fennel flowers and black course-ground black pepper) she was preparing in a small tavern they opened at the ground level of their house facing the main road. Being halfway from Canari to Bastia, the tavern rapidly became the obligatory stop of the high calorie-consuming truck drivers, who enthusiastically interrupted their monotonous trip to enjoy figatelli and, most likely, local wine which has made Patrimonio famous among the wine producers and connoisseurs. At the first floor of the house, the four children during school months were doing their home work. Their daily unenthusiastic commitment was largely attenuated by the fun of writing and drawing fanny faces on the tables and the furniture covered by the grey powder the open trucks left parked on the road were releasing at any breath of wind. The dust was constantly cleaned up by mommy, most likely rather as a boring house duty than a concern about her and the family’s health. Why should it be different, since the Canari mine was reported in 1962 in the “Bulletin of historical and natural sciences society of Corsica” as the “third most florid industry of the isle after forestry and animal products”? Contrary to a later developed tourism industry, the asbestos extraction provided a time-limited modest wealth and a number of Corsican were bound to emigrate Philippe’s older two sons, A and B, emigrated in fact in search of better opportunities to Canada, where one became an engineer in a steel industry and the other, an operator in oil pipelines; the girl married and spent most of her life in Paris, employed as social assistant, the son D., with a solid pragmatic mentality, became an entrepreneur in restoration in Bastia, and opened a quite restful camping site on the shores near Patrimonio.

I have been visiting the campsite for the last 15 years during my summer vacations and D.’s very outgoing personality gifted me of a friendship of uncommon intimacy for two persons who met once a year. He mentioned during the endless evening chats, often focused on medical issues (I’m a doctor!!), that the two emigrated brothers have died of mesothelioma. I was surprised because for my judgment they did not have any occupational risk and were non-smokers; negligently, I did not inquire further. Four years ago at my arrival in Corsica, I found D, at the time 60 years old, in organizing his passing away since a mesothelioma was diagnosed in him in the winter and he was well aware of the prognosis. I felt disarmed, and besides manifesting my closeness, I inquired of him further. Thus, I became fully aware of his family story starting from childhood. His father died at 68 of an unspecified pulmonary “bad disease “, his mother died at 69 of mesothelioma; as I mentioned similarly happened to his two emigrated brothers, who passed away at 47 and 60. His sister died two years after D., at 64, of the same malignancy.

The mine operating since the early forties, had been closed in 1965 because of decreased productivity and surging health hazard awareness, but remained unprotected ever since, until two years ago. A project co-financed by the European Community has now begun to clean the area (nobody locally knows how) which overlooks the beautiful coastal D80 main road of Cape Corse. An association named ANDEVA has been established in 1996, providing information, legal and medical support to the potential victims of the mine,

RAMAZZINI DAYS 2011
WORK OF THE FELLOWS ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

but only in February 2010 the Court for Social Affairs recognized the link between the extraction activity in Canari and asbestos-related pathologies. The government, initially reluctant to consider any compensation, in view that there was a work-related link, has granted to D. a monthly pension of 900 euro from the diagnosis to death for a total of 16.000 euro and 15.000 euro to the three surviving sons. In short, D.'s life, at the time of full productivity, was from the government's point of view, worth 31.000 euro. His widow is not eligible to any compensation. Only through a legal action supported by ANDEVA, the final reimbursement to D.'s family has been settled at 40.000 euro. His emigrated brothers did not receive any compensation. A still unsettled amount of money will be made available to the surviving daughter of D.'s sister. Conclusively this story tells us that a death token may be claimed also by non occupational exposure to asbestos ("The Tragic Legacy of Sania's White Death", Toronto Star, Nov, 1999), which should therefore always be considered in enforcing public health policies.

Thanks to Massimo Crespi who when kindly hosting me on his sailing boat was sadly impressed by the story and asked me to write a short note about. The latter is based on inquiries to D's surviving relatives, to people presently living nearby the mine and from an article appeared on the daily "Corse Matin" (Aug. 2011)