

The Jonckheeres – A Belgian Family Under Siege¹

by Laurie Kazan-Allen

Although Belgium is one of the smaller European Union countries by size, even before it became home to the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and one of the seats of the European Parliament, it punched way above its weight in matters of politics and commerce. Belgium was one of the six founding members of the European Union as well as a founding member of the Eurozone, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Trade Organization.

For decades, Belgium has been at the heart of Europe and at the heart of the country's establishment have been the Emsens – Belgium's third richest family and owners of the asbestos-cement conglomerate Eternit. Enjoying all the privileges that rank, status and money brought, the Emsens were – with the Schmidheiny (Switzerland) and the Cuveliers (France) – European asbestos royalty.²

From small beginnings at their asbestos-cement plants in Belgium and Britain, the Emsens' fortunes prospered and their shareholdings spread far afield.³ Eternit exported, under license, a technology developed around 1900 by the Austrian Ludwig Hatschek which mixed cement with asbestos fibers to produce cost-effective building products with high specifications. To create a climate in which sales of their goods would prosper, Eternit colluded with other stakeholders in the development of a cartel to promote the industry's interests. Whether this involved distributing misinformation to customers, deceiving government enquiries, misleading workers or attacking adverse scientific findings, financial interests were routinely prioritized over issues of health and safety.

The result of these practices was seen early on in communities that were home to asbestos-cement factories. Premature deaths amongst the Eternit workforce were not unusual; the illnesses and demise of workers was public knowledge in the close-knit working class neighborhoods where factory staff lived, but loyalty to the area's biggest employer and fear of retaliation prevented the true scale of the tragedy from emerging. Executives were not immune to the effects of the deadly dust and Etienne van der Rest, an Emsens son-in-law and Chairman of the Eternit Group, died from mesothelioma, the signature cancer related to asbestos exposure.

Generations of families found employment within the Eternit Empire. The story of the Jonckheeres was typical: in 1937, Grandfather Paul Jonckheere relocated from the Congo to Belgium and was hired by Eternit as a mining engineer, eventually becoming director of the Eternit Pipe division. Uncle Jacques worked for Eternit as a manager of the Leopoldville (later Kinshasa) asbestos-cement factory; Pierre Jonckheere, an engineer, worked for Eternit

¹ This text was written as a preface to the book entitled *Asbestos: My War with the Devil's Dust* by Eric Jonckheere (2021).

² Edited Allen, D. & Kazan-Allen, L. *Eternit and the Great Asbestos Trial*. 2012.
<http://ibasecretariat.org/eternit-great-asbestos-trial-toc.htm>

³ Ruers, B. and Schouten, N. *The tragedy of asbestos. Eternit and the consequences of a hundred years of asbestos cement*. 2006.
https://international.sp.nl/sites/international.sp.nl/files/tragedyofasbestos_0.pdf

in Kapelle-op-den-Bos and by the terms of his contract was obliged to live no more than 15 kilometers from the site of the world's largest asbestos-cement manufacturing plant. This is where the paths of the Emsens and the family of Pierre Jonckheere crossed to disastrous effect.

It could be argued that had Pierre, the Father of this book's author, not sought employment with Eternit, none of the tragedy which has befallen the family would have occurred. When he was considering his future, the fact that Eternit was a household name and a long-established brand in Belgium and overseas would no doubt have argued for his following in his Father's footsteps. He could never have known that by accepting the post with Eternit he had entered into a Faustian pact, the results of which were the decimation of his family.

The perfect childhood that Eric described growing up in Kapelle with his brood of brothers and childhood companions was far from idyllic for at its core was an invisible, odorless and tasteless substance that would invade their bodies, poison their homes and contaminate their neighborhoods. The town's wild adventure playgrounds also doubled as dumpsites for the factory's asbestos waste, the picturesque delivery of asbestos cargo from the barges on the canal became lethal when hessian sacks were ripped during unloading and the arrival home of Eternit employees in their asbestos-contaminated work clothes resulted in family members receiving routine exposures to toxic fibers.

Whilst only Pierre was occupationally exposed to Eternit's asbestos, the rest of the family were exposed to fibers he brought home on his body and clothes and to environmental contamination caused by the manufacturing processes at the factory. The consequences could have been foreseen and should have been prevented. Eternit knew about the asbestos hazard but chose to ignore that knowledge, secure in the belief that its political connections and legal advisors would keep it safe.⁴

Although the Eternit name has nowadays been tarnished and replaced with the brand Etex, such a simple fix was not available for the Jonckheeres. The asbestos cancer deaths of Pierre Jonckheere (1987) and his wife Françoise (2000) left five grieving sons: Eric, Pierre-Paul, *Stéphane*, Xavier and Benoit. The demise, of Pierre-Paul (2003) and *Stéphane* (2009) from mesothelioma, the same cancer that had killed their parents, left two widows and six fatherless children.

Despite all the tragedy and grief the Jonckheeres had endured, "the Octopus" – "An ungainly animal that prowls the ocean floor and feeds by choking its victims," which was the name Françoise had given to her cancer – had still not finished with the family. In February 2021 Eric, the oldest of the surviving sons, was diagnosed with the same cancer which had killed his parents and two brothers. The Sword of Damocles which had hung over him for so long had finally crashed to earth.

The news about Eric's diagnosis should not have come as a shock; after all, as he himself had reported, medical tests had shown that he had the same amount of asbestos in his body as a laborer from the Eternit asbestos-cement factory in Kapelle-op-den-Bos. But a shock it was, not just to him and his immediate family but to people around the world who had gotten to know him through his campaigning work.

⁴ Roselli, M. *The Asbestos Lie. The Past and Present of an Industrial Catastrophe*. 2014.
https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/ez_import/FINAL_The_Asbestos_Lie.pdf

In 2007, Eric had become the Co-President of ABEVA – the Belgian Association of Victims of Asbestos – which had been set up by his Mother Françoise and Luc Vandenbroeck, another Belgian asbestos victim. During his tenure, the media profile of ABEVA has been elevated, major gains made for asbestos victims and successful campaigns run over the contamination of the national infrastructure and natural environment. In 2017, asbestos made the front pages of the Belgian newspapers when the Brussels Court of Appeal upheld a ruling condemning Eternit for the environmental asbestos exposure which had killed Françoise Jonckheere in 2000.

Speaking outside the court on the day when the deathbed promise made to Françoise had been honored, Eric was surrounded by asbestos activists from Belgium, Japan, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France and the UK; Chieko Kosuge, whose husband and father-in-law had died from exposure to Eternit asbestos in Japan, was also in attendance to show solidarity with the Jonckheeres' struggle as was Sugio Furuya, the Coordinator of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network. Standing in the Brussels sunshine, in measured tones Eric told his supporters that it was: "a great day. This decision represents an enormous relief for us and we are fully satisfied since it recognizes the responsibility and the fault of the company." The fact that Eternit, a cornerstone of the economic, social and political life of Belgium for so many decades had been held to account for the damage done in its home country was a development that reverberated around the world.

As Eric embarked upon a course of radiation in May 2021, the virtual meeting of the International Mesothelioma Interest Group (iMig) began. Members of this group include the world's leading researchers and clinicians involved in the field of mesothelioma. Many of the advances that had been made in treatment of this cancer had been announced at iMig conferences. One can only hope that the timing of this event coming as Eric began his journey to recovery is a good omen.

This volume details the price the Jonckheeres paid for Eternit's profits. How many other families around the world have suffered so that the Emsens, the Schmidheineys, the Cuveliers and other asbestos profiteers could enjoy lives of privilege purchased with asbestos dollars? The fact that in 2021 one million tons of asbestos are being used annually is an abomination. Asbestos industry stakeholders will be held to account for their crimes. If not now, then soon. The future is asbestos-free.