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Eternit – “a family affair”

The way complaints in “the asbestos scandal” are handled in the criminal courts raises issues about the liability of the main asbestos industry firms who have always played down any links between them.

Where Eternit is concerned, it is a matter of record that the word originally referred to a patent, not a company name. But there is plentiful evidence of “family ties” between a select few of the asbestos cement industry “nobility” throughout the 20th century.

Two recent publications have shed light on these low-profile but undeniable links between the Emsens (Eternit Belgium), Cuvelier (Eternit France) and Schmidheiny (Eternit Switzerland) families.

In *Eternit et l’amiante. Aux sources du profit, une industrie du risque*^a, historian Odette Hardy-Hémery informs us that “the Eternit companies were linked from the very start by multiple interlocking holdings”. The Belgian Emsens family, for example, was a founder investor in the joint stock company Eternit France on its incorporation in 1922. Seven years on, Eternit Belgium, Switzerland, Spain and Italy set up a joint subsidiary in Germany. Eternit France’s board of directors decided that it “could not afford not to be involved in this international event”, and took a 5% stake in the company’s capital.

SAIAC – the association of asbestos cement industry companies – was set up the same year to exchange information on technology developments in the asbestos industry. But joint raw materials purchasing was a second strategic objective of the consortium. All Eternit companies across Europe, as well as the UK’s Turner & Newall, were founder members.

The interplay of interests between the different Eternit companies was to carry on throughout the 20th century. The book *The tragedy of asbestos*^b reprints the memberships of the board of directors of Compagnie Financière Eternit (Eternit Belgium) in 1966, 1976 and 1980, where the Schmidheiny brothers and members of the Cuvelier and Hatschek families sit alongside high-profile Emsens family names.

Despite the highly active management and production co-operation between the different Eternit firms, their former heads still staunchly deny having been aware of the dangers of the “wonder mineral”. When some former representatives of the “asbestos cartel” have to explain themselves before the courts, that will be for justice to decide.

^a O. Hardy-Hémery, *Eternit et l’amiante. 1922-2000. Aux sources du profit, une industrie du risque*, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2005, 272 p.

^b R.F. Ruers, N. Schouten, *The tragedy of asbestos. Eternit and the consequences of a hundred years of asbestos cement*, 2005, 122 p. Downloadable free in English from: <http://international.sp.nl/publications/asbestos.pdf>.