

# How could we avoided becoming sick?

Carmelo Cuscunà

I was born in Locri Reggio Calabria on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1923. At nineteen and half I was called up for military service and discharged on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1947. I really wanted to go back home as Locri was marvellous with beaches that had sand as fine as snow and a sea where you could carry on swimming in until November.

Unfortunately there was no work, so reluctantly I went to live with a relative, Felice who had lived in Ronchi from the end of the First World War. He was a married cousin, but had no children and thus welcomed me with open arms. Both he and his wife entreated me to stay so that I could get work. Unfortunately, at that time I found it hard going as there was an economic slump in the area; the exception being the Dockyard. However my relatives kept saying “ Hang in there as the downturn won't last forever.”

So I did and asked for and got a residency at Ronchi and was granted a work permit to work in a reafforestation scheme, planting pine saplings on the Carso. On my first day I found myself working in front of Monfalcone Station, towards the areas of Mount Spaccio and Trieste.

On finishing this job, I turned my hand to picking up as many skills as possible. At that time I was into photography and managed to get myself a position as an assistant to Aldo Vittori, Ronchi's only resident photographer. After a bit, I went off alone to do weddings, but the pay wasn't too good. Consequently I was always looking around for another job.

One day I met a friend who I hadn't seen for a while. As he enquired as to what I was doing, I told him of my woes. We parted with him saying “ I'll pop round to see you tonight.” That evening we talked a bit with him then concluding with “ Tomorrow, come to work with me.” I jumped for joy.

The following morning we met in front of the gates of the Bernobich's yard and together entered the company's office. Bernobich, the owner, took my details and signed me on. Trusting in my friend, Edi, we boarded the liner “Mare Nostrum” and he then explained what I had to do.

Naturally, I started off as a labourer, my first job being to open up sacks of asbestos-looking like grey/green flour - and then mix it with cement in a large metal tub. Water was then added and the mixture then kneaded together into a mortar. Whilst I was doing that the ladders were plastering the tied in pipes' wire-meshing with this stuff.. Everything had to be perfect first time, as there was little chance of touching up later. After a month of being the labourer, I too started lagging..

Like most men, I was pleased to have work, but it wasn't a bed of roses. Ship construction turn-a rounds were tight, men were packed together shoulder to shoulder. It was a mess as there were welders, carpenters, shipwrights and painters working alongside us. Each contaminated the confined spaces with their own type of dust and fumes.

Times were hard for, unlike today, ships were built differently in the 1950's. Cabins for example were built on board, bit by bit, whereas today they are prefabricated and fully furnished and then dropped into their designated place by a crane.

In 1956, I asked to be retrained as an electrical welder. After my retraining, I worked on board ship as welder in the machine and boiler rooms. It was terrible when we had to weld zinc sheets. I'm not sure what was worse – the asbestos dust or zinc fumes. And I did this for around five years.

1961 saw me change jobs again to the Marine section. There we installed all secondary fixtures prior to the launch. Such fixtures were the navigation systems, winches and capstans, lifeboats, hawsers and cat-holes, anchors and their chains. When the boilers were installed the ship was ready to be handed over to the owners.

In 1964 I transferred to the Naval Dockyard which included submarine construction. I was involved in the sea trials of all four submarines of the Toti class and have fond regards of my involvement with them. But they were only good down to a certain depth or in heavy seas; their ventilation system was inadequate so we suffered from burning eyes, sore throats and shortness of breathe when the air became stale .

My last launch was with the aircraft carrier, Giuseppe Garibaldi as soon after, in 1983, I retired.

So that's what I and my workmates did.

In 1976, shadows showed up on my lungs. Fortunately, things haven't got any worse; unlike many of my ex-workmates. Bearing in mind the minimum protection we had at work, how could we not become ill with all the dust and fumes generated.

Our bosses knew about the consequences of us doing the type of work we were doing and the suffering and harrowing deaths people would consequently incur. Now it's time for them to own up, to make amends with those innocent individuals and families destroyed by their neglect.

I dedicate my story to those who have suffered and the many who worked alongside me.