

Monfalcone docks inside me by Giovanni Zeleznik

Wednesday 20 December 2006 and I was in Udine's Santa Maria della Misericordia Hospital. It was around 8 a.m. and was walking through its corridors, glancing through its windows at a serene winter morning, hoping for its non arrival.

My nurse handed me over to Mr Morelli and his staff in the operating theatre. They were all trying to put me at my ease. Someone said something about my illness, where I contracted it, where I worked. I replied:

“ Monfalcone Dockyard, so in a way I'm that yard.”

My name is Giovanni Zeleznik, my surname meaning “Iron” in Slav. My family, clan, tribe community, call it what you like, has had a tradition, throughout the centuries, of making things using iron, be they armour or arms.

Our roots go back a thousand years to Pomerania(on the Baltic Sea) when the Zeleznik nobility took part in the crusades of Frederick Barbarossa, the then German Holy Roman Emperor. Whilst crossing Serbia, they took possession of an ancient Roman fortress at Nis(Nissa) and it became a Christian bulwark against the Turks until its fall in 1389. It was called fortress Zeleznik. Upon its destruction, our family fled to Trieste for protection.

Thereafter our family saw Trieste as their new future and tied their metalworking skills to the fortunes of that city and the shipyards clustered around its golf.

My great grandfather, Antonio, died in the S.Roggio di Muggia naval dockyard on the 25 July 1901. He had been its foreman. A small commemorative chapel is dedicated to him and others who worked in the yard.

With the construction of the Monfalcone Shipyards, its owners, the Cosulich Brothers wanted John, Antonio's son, to be work's foreman and my grandfather, Peter as the same for carpenters and on board shipwrights. Our family name, from the onwards, became intertwined with that of the Cosulich's and their dockyards.

Monday, 2nd March 1964 was a cold, but sunny day. I was not even 18 and now apprenticed to start in the dock's tracing room as part of my apprenticeship to become a metalworker. The Personal Manager was a cousin related by marriage. My future of a foreman had been mapped out for me. So before being conscripted, I worked in the welding shop and others, on a platform, slipways, and finally the naval area. At the same time I took internal courses.

After serving as an NCO in the Navy, I took up my apprenticeship until 1st July 1971 where I was given an administrative job covering two welding shops(the yard was now called Italcantieri).. By 1976 I had become highly thought of and I remained there for another eight years.

Looking back, these years were when I think I was most exposed to asbestos. Although subject to Health and Safety laws and those of the RINA(Royal Institute of Naval Architects) work practices on board ship saw us handling asbestos. More precisely, we machined asbestos panelling and lagging that came in from former Yugoslavia and abroad. Its handling, even for a non drinking and smoking sports fanatic like me, was a lethal cocktail.

My remaining years there, until I retired on 1st January 2000, were fulfilling and responsible. I sorted out productivity bonuses and remuneration for the yards (now called Fincantieri) and had the satisfaction of being recalled as a project consultant in 2003-4 for the Trieste Directorate.

In a nutshell this is my story and that of my family, the dockyard and now that of a man who has no left lung, a pericardium made from a cow and a synthetic diaphragm; all because of mesothelioma. It's a story of a life that was permanently at risk, trying to hate no one, but raging inside.

We call upon law makers to identify the best solutions for asbestos and extend this invitation to the law enforcers to resolve disputes within a reasonable time thus cutting the ground from those who wish to seed hatred, revenge and discontent for their own ends. Such events have recently been seen at the dockyard following the deaths of asbestos sufferers. This is not what we believe in as it only sheds more blood and cannot bring people back to life. Our quest is not vendettas or scapegoats, but to simply ask those who made mistakes to own up and compensate those who have and will die.



Giovanni Zeleznik died of the complications from the disease 13 January 2008