

# THE DEADLY DANISH DUST

My mother's father, my granddad, exists only in tales and memories of family members. I never got to meet him and my mom and her siblings only got 12-18 years with him. He was a factory worker, moving fibre cement from one place to another working at the Danish Eternit Factory, Eternitten", located in the port and industry town of Aalborg. At its peak, the factory had 1600 people employed. Like many of the factory workers he died of the comorbidity, mesothelioma, a cancer that is caused exclusively by the dust from asbestos that reveals itself during production and destruction. A deadly dust that kills within a few decades from the first exposure. The production was cheap, profitable and easy, and it took - I'd say thousands - of lives. But that's the thing: No one has cared to count.

Eternitten was established in 1927. By the 1930's, workers were beginning to show health risks, and by the 1970's it was established as a certain fact that the production was causing these issues. The factory owners, after conducting studies that showed conclusively that the workers were becoming ill, lied to the workers that they were all healthy - though they themselves stopped coming to the factories during the 40's. The production was kept alive for decades, only shutting down in 2004<sup>1</sup>.

My granddad would return from work covered in dust, exposing his family and friends. In Aalborg, the wind comes from the west 292 days a year, and so the factory was located so the dust would blow over the poorer working-class areas and not the expensive houses at the top of the hill. A whole residential area housing mainly working-class families was constantly covered in the white dust during the Eternit years, exposing hundreds of kids and people that could not afford fine housing.

I want a dataset that maps how many people have died from the dust. I want their names, their ages, and their postcodes. I want the yearly bottom line of the CEO's and the number of people that could have been spared a painful early death.

But these numbers don't exist. Mesothelioma is at the earliest stage detectable around 15 years after the contact, but often diagnosed 40 years later. Combined with the lies about the harmful effects it causes people makes the exact source very hard to trace.

This explanation is an easy out though: that the nature of the disease and the knowledge at the time was not enough to have acted and kept record. Missing data is a major factor when you want to continue an unethical business; if there's no numbers, no harm is done, and why would you then change a profitable business?

The company, which has never taken accountability, continues to flourish in the business world. It has recently made a 39 million pounds contract to build a new cement plant in the El-Jadin region in Morocco<sup>2</sup>. A contract they might not have gotten if the numbers existed. This production sees people as disposable means to an economic and political gain.

My granddad spent his whole life moving toxic dust and bringing the dust home to his kids, his wife, and his friends to inhale. And like he died of the cancer, my aunt did too a few years ago. She being the oldest of the siblings, we still have a few years to see if more of this family will die from being neighbors to the factory, joining all the other un(ac)counted deaths.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/asbest-fra-eternitten-i-aalborg-har-gjort-isabel-syg-af-kraeft-stoevet-var-over-det>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.flsmidth.com/en-gb/company/news/news-and-events/2019/flsmidth-wins-contract-for-new-cement-plant-in-morocco>