

Keynote address by JÖRG SAMBETH at the “Public Eye Awards” 2007 in Davos. Sambeth was technical director of the firm Givaudan, in Seveso, Italy, and was blamed for the dioxin disaster that occurred there in 1976.

A Mosaic of Human Arrogance and Ignorance

After the toxic cloud escaped, the only matter of interest was the accident’s sequence of events and the people on hand. The search was for the culprits. The public and the injured wanted a conviction, which was understandable. But the question why the then Hoffmann-La Roche was even operating and not renovating the ailing Icmesa factory at the gateway to Milan faded into oblivion, as did the bringing to light of the internal power structures that made such an event possible in the first place.

What Sabine Gisiger and I want to show – she with the film “Gambit” and I with my book “Incident in Seveso” – is the mosaic of malice, stupidity and arrogance that led to the accident. My first big mistake was that I, without thinking, took over a chemical process and plant under the assumption that as a subsidiary of a leading corporation, today known as Roche, everything would be in order. The second mistake was that I followed the instructions of the then vice president not to speak about dioxin after the accident and under no circumstances to mention the parent company.

I was naive. For a long time I did not realize that I had been selected by the corporation as a scapegoat and sacrificial pawn, in order to protect my superiors and distract attention from other things. While preparing for my defense, I uncovered information that would have exonerated me and incriminated the corporation. But my own attorneys, paid for by the company, never presented the documents to the court.

Why was the top management in Basel so interested in such a filthy factory? I still don’t understand it. The only possible answer: To practice truly irresponsible and slipshod chemistry. Or was it hiding the production of secret chemical weapons, a claim that a German TV journalist has been making for over 10 years? I only know that Swiss military personnel asked me after the accident if we had any dioxin left. The inquiry has been kept under wraps since then.

Seveso was the trigger for a worldwide anti-chemistry wave. One result was that safety regulations were fundamentally improved. I don’t believe that someone could take the same risk today and think he could get away with it. Other factors such as arrogance, ignorance, image neurosis and ready obedience exist today as they did then. We managers have no one to blame but ourselves for the plummeting faith in our profession. I am no exception.

“Gambit” premiered in Seveso. I was there, despite an uneasy feeling in my stomach. After the film I took part in a discussion, where it was said: “Finally someone has come and told what really happened back then.” I was the first of the company directors who brought himself to say the words, “I’m sorry.”

I believe that we benefit by not forgetting these events. It is our duty, by keeping the memories alive, to ensure that the experience is not repeated.

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