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"After us, the toxic tide": when Europe chased a deadly cargo from Seveso

Forty years ago, 41 dioxin barrels disappeared, which the global corporation Roche should have disposed of. **A German master detective solved the case, which is also a lesson in environmental history.** A look back.

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Test run for disposal in the high-temperature furnace: researchers in November 1984 with samples from the notorious dioxin drums.

The cargo, which has half of Europe in a state of excitement and fear, arrives at dawn. It is June 4, 1983, a Saturday, when the trucks, escorted by police, pull up at the chemical giant Hoffmann-La Roche in Basel. The

strange spectacle can be followed live on screen all over the world. In the lead role: 41 dark brown barrels of toxic waste, which are now being stored in a high-security concrete cellar so that they don't disappear again.

Scoffers say, "The dirt returns to the front door." And indeed, here one witnesses the end of a months-long odyssey. But it is only the provisional end of a thriller that deals with almost unbelievable mishaps and embarrassments - and with responsibility and cover-ups.

Scarred children

This story begins in Seveso, an Italian town halfway between Milan and Como. There, on July 10, 1976, a production process at the Icmesa chemical plant went out of control, causing a white toxic cloud to descend over an area of more than two square kilometers. Two kilograms of dioxin, one of the strongest poisons ever synthesized and known mainly from the Vietnam War as a component of the defoliant "Agent Orange" sprayed by the Americans, are presumed to have been spilled.

In Seveso, hundreds of people soon have to be hospitalized. More than 120 children fall ill with chloracne, a severe skin disease; the pictures of the disfigured faces go around the world. 4,000 small animals die, and 80,000 farm animals have to be emergency slaughtered. In view of the danger of deformities, pregnant women in the contaminated area are allowed to have abortions. And farming is no longer an option.



What came down from the sky? Experts in protective suits collect soil samples after the chemical accident in Seveso.

Icmesa produces for the company Givaudan, which in turn is part of Roche. The global corporation from Basel is coming under massive pressure after the disaster in Seveso: Instead of communicating openly after the accident, it was initially concealed, denied and appeased, it is criticized. The image is badly tarnished. And Seveso - even before the disasters of Bhopal in 1984 and Chernobyl in 1986 - became a symbol for the modern risk society, which produces dangers that it can no longer control. "Seveso is everywhere," it is said in environmental protection circles.

And in the years that followed, those responsible not only had to deal with court cases and reparation payments, but also with highly toxic dioxin residues that still had to be removed and disposed of: they filled 41 steel barrels.

Scandalous arrogance

The highly toxic waste is taken away from Seveso on September 10, 1982, passes the border with France near Ventimiglia and is officially declared as "industrial waste" ten days later in St-Quentin, north of Paris. After that, the traces are lost.

No one is interested until the organization Greenpeace persistently inquires about the whereabouts of the barrels in February 1983. Did they possibly never arrive at a landfill site? And, if not, is the potentially lethal dioxin now stored somewhere in the neighborhood? Roche, one of the most powerful companies in the world, says it unfortunately does not know the location of the barrels. This causes renewed outrage. The German Ministry of the Interior, for example, criticizes Roche's behavior as "unbelievable and scandalous," as an expression of pure arrogance. And with every day that the barrels are not found, the pressure increases. But not only against Roche.



In February 1977, a doctor examines children in a school in Seveso who have developed a skin rash as a result of the chemical accident at the Icmesa company.

In fact, it is gradually becoming clear how the toxic waste from Seveso disappeared in such a strange way: through the mediation of the Italian authorities, Roche has concluded a contract with Mannesmann Italiana for its storage "in an approved and controlled landfill site in a European country, with the exception of Switzerland and Italy". In doing so, Roche also signs an agreement prohibiting any knowledge of the transport route and final disposal of the barrels. Mannesmann, meanwhile, hires two subcontractors who have already earned a dubious reputation for waste disposal - a Geneva one-man company called Wadir and the Marseille-based freight forwarding firm Spelidec, whose boss Bernard Paringaud is a windy World War II veteran. The bill to Roche is 159,000 francs.

In fact, at the end of 1982, the Basel-based group receives a declaration notarized by an Italian notary: the Seveso barrels had been stored in a "controlled and approved landfill (. . .) under a layer of clay at least five meters thick, in accordance with the environmental protection regulations in force and with the written confirmation of the company responsible for managing the storage site." A tranquilizer pill like the in-house success product Valium, but only for a short time.

In the sea or in the GDR?

An unprecedented press war breaks out between Roche and Mannesmann: "We have been deceived by Mannesmann," says Roche executive board member André Futterknecht. The other side (which also does not want to know anything about the location of the barrels) counters that Roche was well aware of the third-party companies. Meanwhile, the forwarder Bernard Paringaud, whose company picked up the cargo in Seveso, is already in French custody, but remains silent.

In Switzerland, Federal Councillor Alphons Egli intervenes in the debate and certifies Roche's "honorable" conduct on the basis of documents presented. The fact that the company itself "got into a bit of trouble" with the concluded contract does not speak against its decency. He sees the dioxin scandal as a "hint from fate" to move forward with the new Swiss environmental protection law, including better controls on hazardous waste.

More generally, the case of the missing toxic barrels has revealed how patchy European waste legislation is. The chemical waste, officially called "contaminated site," and its disposal are becoming an irritant. In the European Parliament in Strasbourg, there is talk of a "mess" and of the "machinations of the mafia". The dangers are suppressed and played down: "After us, the toxic tide," writes "Der Spiegel. Shortly afterwards, regulations were tightened throughout Europe on the handling of toxic substances in chemical production.

More and more new speculations are making the rounds. There is hardly a European country that is not suspected of being the final repository of the "barrels of death": dumped in the sea off Marseille? Taken to the GDR, to the dump in Schönberg? "On the way to England," as the "Sunday Times" fears? Or perhaps disposed of in Switzerland at the Kölliken hazardous waste dump? The hunt for the barrels is taking on absurd proportions: Ministries, Interpol, secret services and the military are searching for them. In addition, private detectives are investigating on behalf of the criticized companies. Roche even receives an offer from a fortune teller who wants to track down the barrels using a pendulum and a map of Europe.

Showdown in the slaughterhouse

The breakthrough finally comes with the legendary German "super agent" Werner Mauss, who has been hired by Mannesmann. Through the wife of the imprisoned Bernard Paringaud, a native of Munich, he wants to find out the location of the barrels. And with his good contacts, a few tricks and plenty of cash, Mauss succeeds, as the media later reveal.



"Worse secured than Dad's porno magazine": hiding place of the 41 barrels in the village of Anguilmcourt-le-Sart.

On May 19, 1983, a task force moves into the village of Anguilmcourt-le-Sart, with its 300 inhabitants, in northern France. There, the barrels are stored in an abandoned slaughterhouse, next to a school and kindergarten, covered only with a tarpaulin. The sensational find goes through the world press. "Worse secured than grandma's preserves or dad's porno magazine," quips the Berlin "Tageszeitung." The French army takes care of the interim storage until the dioxin barrels are shipped to Basel in early June 1983.

But that is not the end of this bizarre story. Suddenly, an opportunity arose to dispose of the hazardous waste in Roche's immediate vicinity, at its competitor Ciba-Geigy. The contaminated waste from Seveso can be incinerated in a high-temperature furnace that has just been put into operation. It is not only in Switzerland that people wonder why Roche did not

consider this obvious option earlier. After a few test runs, the 41 barrels are disposed of in May 1985 under the supervision of a commission of experts.

Or not after all? In 1993, serious accusations are made once again on German television: At the Icmesa in Seveso, dioxin had been secretly produced as a warfare agent for NATO. And the 41 barrels had never been destroyed, but only duplicates. The real ones had been taken to the GDR. Once again, Seveso becomes an emotionally debated media topic. However, there is no proof for the steep thesis.



Finally in Basel after the Tour de France: Roche Executive Committee member André Futterknecht (left) and Chairman of the Board Fritz Gerber inspect the 41 barrels that arrived on June 4, 1983.