Letter from Chernobyl

Fifth Estate Collective

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Since the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in April 1986, much information has come out about its terrible effects. The irradiation of (particularly European) people, animals and vegetation has been devastating. Dr. John Gofman, a Widely respected expert on radiation effects, estimated that more than a million people will develop cancers, half of them fatal, as a result of the accident.

Commissioner James Asseltine of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission told a congressional subcommittee that "we can expect to see a core meltdown accident within the next 20 years, and it is possible that such an accident could result in off-site releases of radiation that are as large as, or larger than, the releases estimated to have occurred at Chernobyl." Investigative journalist James Ridgeway, writing a year after the accident in the New York Village Voice, observed, "At the time," the Chernobyl disaster "was widely viewed as the nail in the coffin of nuclear energy."

But that does not any longer appear to be the case, he writes, and "the Chernobyl accident has had little effect on the future course of nuclear power." Even as the events unfolded, Reagan insisted that nuclear power would continue, "properly managed," of course, to provide increasing amounts of electricity. And Gorbachev declared that the future could "hardly be imagined" without it. Hans Blix of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a U.N. affiliate, told a nuclear energy conference that "nuclear power is not a luxury we can drop like a garment. Rather, it is a reality we shall continue to live with." According to Ridgeway, the U.S. Department of Energy has "a strategic plan to signal [the] 'second coming' " of nuclear power, and moves are presently being made to circumvent local opposition from residents and state or municipal politicians by centralizing and streamlining nuclear licensing procedures. The IAEA projects orders for 90 to 200 large nuke plants over the next decade, with ten more Third World countries joining the nuclear club. ("New Nukes and the Power Struggle," *Village Voice* 4/28/87; also see *Direct Action*, 3126 Shattuck Avenue, Berkley CA 94705, particularly no. 25, and the *Radiation Events Monitor*, Box 72, Acton MA 01720, for info.)

The death wish of the exterminist, megatechnic capitalist states remains as powerful as ever. Whether the desire for life will be strong enough to overcome it is still an open question. One of the most compelling texts to come out of the Chernobyl aftermath is the following letter by a woman who lived in Chernobyl, later translated in the Italian newspaper La Republica by its USSR correspondent, Alberto Jacoviello. We first saw it in The Alliance (PO Box 14742, Portland, Oregon 97214) of November 1986.

Jacoviello writes: The account took its course until it came to me. I transcribed it, because it seemed to me the first testimony that grasped up to now how a nuclear disaster can appear in the mysterious guise of the arcane seductive colours of artificial fireworks, and how it is seen as such by persons unacquainted with nuclear energy, as all of us — are…I cannot guarantee the absolute truthfulness of the

account, but the person who reported it to me, reconstructing it almost word by word, is an earnest person and worthy of trust.

The Letter

It was the first evening of spring-like warmth after a severe and interminable winter. And this was our misfortune. Many people from Chernobyl lingered in the streets and on their window-sills until-it was late. The children tried to prolong the things they do before going to sleep. We didn't scold them because they, like us, felt the pleasure of a spring that finally arrived. And tomorrow they would not have to go to school.

Everything happened as if it were in a mysterious fable. In the sky, very high, there suddenly appeared Catherine-wheels of enormous stars that seemed on fire, and then, suddenly, went out, falling like gigantic fireworks. We were fascinated to watch that unusual and very beautiful- spectacle. And we called the children because they too enjoyed it. It seemed to us that something natural had happened, or perhaps something at the borders of the supernatural. We didn't understand what it was, but we couldn't tear our eyes from the sky.

Then the stars disappeared and there remained only a trail of smoke that every once in a while was coloured by fire. And then we all went to sleep with the hope that next evening the phenomenon would be repeated.

The next day the spectacle of the first evening was the subject of everyone's conversation. No one thought of the nuclear plant. On Saturday, everyone did what they had to do. and when evening came, many of the people in Chernobyl turned to watch the sky.

Confused Voices

However, the spectacle wasn't repeated, except for some glows that every once in a while appeared on the horizon. And Sunday we had almost forgotten it when the first confused, vague voices reached Chernobyl from Pripjat, the village mostly inhabited by technicians assigned to the nuclear plant, and their families.

These voices said that there had been a break at the reactor but that it wasn't serious and they were proceeding to eliminate it. We stayed relatively calm, but the memory of the mysterious, unusual spectacle of the night between Friday and Saturday, although fascinating, caused some uneasiness. But because the local authorities were silent, it seemed to us that actually the dimensions of the drama were limited.

The Veiled Sun

There were marriages that Sunday in Chernobyl. And everything went according to our traditional habits: the orchestra played well-wishing music, brides dressed in white, automobiles were decorated with flowers, happy relatives. In a word, a Sunday like any other, cheered by a hot sun that we believed now appeared only a little veiled by a kind of hoar-frost that wasn't characteristically white.

The alarm went off on Monday morning. We saw trucks loaded with people coming from Pripjat who probably were coming from the plant's village. We began to understand that something serious had happened. But not even then were we very disturbed. We didn't see any signs of catastrophe around us and our old slowness, our old Russian somnolence, our rooted fatalism made us believe, even then, that nothing irreparable had turned up.

But then the children came back from school earlier than usual and they told us that they were warned not to leave the house, to wash their hair, to change their clothes. Only then did we think that the spectacle of Friday night was not a natural event but a kind of convulsion provoked by man and whose consequences, we began to understand, could be very dangerous.

What Really Happened?

I left the house to do my shopping. The people were disturbed, fearful. Everybody asked the same question: what really happened at the plant? The warning given to the children to wash their hair and not to leave the house made even us automatically touch our hair with the fear of feeling something unusual under our fingers, something mysterious, and made us look at our clothes with a fear that we'd never known.

I scrutinised the trees in order to read on their leaves signs of something they said. And the flowers. Some, it seemed to me, were sprinkled with a whitish powder, others seemed completely normal. Perhaps it was only the product of my agitation. Always, I thought, people end up being self-influenced in the face of phenomena whose nature they don't know, and of which, therefore, they can't have an historical memory.

Where Will We Go Now?

I found my husband at home. The workers at his factory, he said, were told to get ready to evacuate Chernobyl with their families. We looked at each other, terrified, and we embraced each other. Only at that clear moment did we have the sensation of a catastrophe. This was the third exodus we'd lived through.

As children we had been taken away from Moscow the second year of the war and were housed with our parents beyond the Urals. In 1970 we were married and because my husband's factory was closed we were transferred to Chernobyl, where we had had three children and had lived happily.

Where will we go now? Maybe with relatives that we had in Sverdlovsk. We telephoned first to Sverdlovsk and then to Moscow where we had some friends. Both the relatives and the friends were amazed to learn what had happened. and that we could not tell them anything except very vaguely. Both said they were ready to welcome us.

Until evening nothing happened. In great anxiety, we waited for the television program "Vremja." But only halfway through the program a very meager piece of news informed us that an accident had happened at the nuclear plant without furnishing further particulars. We were unable to understand if this news ought to reassure us or alarm us.

The next day, Tuesday, everything started early. The soldiers came to ask us if we were ready to leave and where we wanted to go. We answered that for the present we preferred to go to Moscow, very much closer than Sverdlovsk. after that it would depend on the length of time foreseen for our absence. On that point they told us they knew nothing and added that it would be three hours before they took us.

...Never, Never, Would she Move From her Home

We went down to the floor below where an old friend lived, a woman alone who was eighty years old, and we asked her where she would go, what she would do. She said that never, never, would she be moved from her home. She would hide. She survived the war when she lived in Rostov on the Don and—she told us—she would survive also the radiation from Chernobyl. We tried to convince her, but it was to no use.

Three hours later, the soldiers came back. They loaded us, together with other families, in a truck that took the road to Kiev, from where we would take the train for Moscow. Along the road we met many soldiers trying to get the Kolkhosian peasants to leave. They refused. The peasants, as in every country in the world, always refuse to be taken from their land, from their homes, from their animals, from their implements. Maybe an earthquake might convince them. Or a famine. But what was radioactivity? Where was its danger?

Train to Moscow

At Kiev we found that everything was normal except the heavy traffic of civil and military trucks. the station was very crowded and the people gathered around the trains for Moscow. But we who came from Chernobyl had precedence. So we left for Moscow together with other people like us: people from Chernobyl and Pripjat.

No one knew anything exact about what had really happened; we made hypotheses about the two-day delay in providing news. An engineer from Chernobyl told us that Gorbachev had been informed only on Sunday night of what had happened in the night between Friday and Saturday.

At Moscow we found our friends waiting for us at the station. They asked for news that we weren't able to give. But before reaching their house we were taken to Hospital Number 7 for an examination. Here we learned that there were patients with very serious wounds. No one told us how many there were, but there was an atmosphere of fear of the unknown that these wounds represented. We were watched with a mixture of responsibility and uneasiness. We spent two days in the hospital, undergoing examinations of every kind: thyroid, blood, hair, eyes, and naturally, clothes.

In the meantime, other people arrived and we learned that the range of the evacuated territory had to be at least 30 or 40 kilometers.

Tuesday evening, again "Vremja." It spoke of two dead and of many dozens wounded. What must we believe when all day mysterious listeners to western radios told us of two thousand dead? To judge from what we had been able to see, we were inclined to believe our government was right.

A Month Later

Almost a month has passed and we are still here. No one has told us if and when we can go back to Chernobyl. My husband has been helped to find temporary work, but it is evident that within a little while, we will have to decide: find a permanent arrangement in Moscow, go to Sverlovsk, or return to Chernobyl. But of these three solutions, the last seems the most improbable. Friends from down there whom we meet in Moscow tell me that relatives staying in areas immediately adjacent to the evacuated area have noted strange and disturbing phenomena. An enormous number of mushrooms with bizarre forms have sprung up and no one dares to touch them. A drastic ordinance forbids it and it is repeated every hour.

The Russians adore mushrooms and, without this ordinance, maybe they would not resist the temptation.

The tallest trees seem like they are drying up day after day. Others are bending over. Wheat fields are yellowing, the water in the rivers seems of an unusual color.

I don't know what value to put on these mysterious signs. The only thing I can say is that I have not been able to connect truly, deep in my consciousness, the fascinating spectacle of the sky illuminated by those enormous, lofty stars, and the monstrous mushrooms that sprout from those plots, trees that are drying up, wheat fields precociously yellowed, rivers that change color. This mixture of the beautiful and the horrible will make up, now, my life.

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