

MARIA *, Czech Republic

Anna Vomáčková interviewed her mother who was 23 when the Chernobyl catastrophe happened. Maria worked as a physiotherapist in Bohemia (then a part of Czechoslovakia) and on the day of the catastrophe she organized “a day with sports” on a playground.

I have to admit that I had some idea about my mother’s attitudes towards nuclear energy and Chernobyl catastrophe before our interview. Her answers, however, surprised me several times in many ways. When we got to the third set of questions, a very nice and open discussion came up which attracted also other family members...

Interviewee

My mother Maria was born in 1963 and during all her childhood and adolescence she lived with her parents and sisters in a small village in West Bohemia. After having finished grammar school, she went to Pilsen to study physiotherapy. In the year 1986 she married and started to work as a physiotherapist (she has the same profession till now) and she has got 2 children who were born in 1988 and in 1991.

Attitude to nuclear energy before the catastrophe

Before the catastrophe my mother knew about the existence of nuclear power plants, which are able to cheaply produce clear energy which doesn’t harm the environment. The field of nuclear energy seemed to her to be a very good perspective at the time. This opinion was shaped at school during physics lessons and probably also by propaganda. The way she saw it, the public wasn’t very interested in the topic of security of those power plants, though. As she remembers, more than security the issue of the storage site for nuclear waste was discussed at the time.

The experience of Chernobyl accident

My interviewee got to know about the catastrophe at work 4 days after it happened. The previous 10 days she had been staying with her colleague as a physiotherapist on a medical camp for asthmatics. According to her words, they were “staying outside as much as possible making excursions and admonishing children to breathe deeply the fresh air”. On the day of the catastrophe, they organized “a day with sports” on a playground...

At first, just short depreciating notices appeared in the media. Nobody could fully realize the seriousness of that situation, and because of this lack of information, reactions were rather indifferent. My mother did not consider the incident “from far, far away” as anything that could really touch her country. But as the news went deeper into the incident and its consequences, and as more and more details went out in the open (which was about 14 days later, when the most serious fallout danger, however, had disappeared and nobody could hedge against the danger), this attitude changed. She started to care about the topic; it was also the topic often discussed among colleagues and family members – people exchanged the information they had got about it. Since my family lived and lives in West Bohemia, the “Germans” as she jointly calls the radio stations “America’s voice” and “Radio Free Europe” (emission coming from Germany) served as sources of information.

My mother is however aware of the fact that the public really learnt anything about the catastrophe rose of the Gorbachev authorisation – and nobody knows how many other similar incidents happened in the past we don't have a clue about.

The first concerns which came to my interviewees mind were worries about her little niece and all the children from the camp. She realized that consequences can appear even 20 or 30 years later. The way she told, she was absolutely shocked by the circumstances of the accident: she learned that in spite of the hazardousness they were aware of, they were implementing some experiments in the working condition, which caused the blow up. To her, this means total ignorance of security measures, irresponsibility towards the people. *“I felt really sorry with all the people directly affected – ruined health, demolished houses, damaged environment, ruined lives... And nothing was done for them, not counting the liquidators’ “treatment” paid by state, which was actually worthless. ”* A statement which comes after a while can be very surprising for us, who did not experience the period of communism: *“I wasn't shocked at all by the fact that we weren't informed about the situation. I found it normal, it was common that nobody had told us anything, people were used to it. The fact that somebody could blame the Communist party for it didn't cross my mind at all.”*

Also among the public she could feel defy and anxiety. From an ecological and social issue it was becoming more and more a political issue. *“When I go back to the time of ending communism in my mind, I recollect this incident as a big issue (with the earthquake in Armenia).”*

The importance of nuclear energy issue in the further life

My interviewee admits that since then she is afraid of nuclear energy; she is also aware of the possibility of abuse. In her point of view, however, nuclear energy is generally no more considered to be dangerous– rather economic aspects are prioritized today.

The importance of Chernobyl today

In my mothers' opinion, the Chernobyl tragedy is a memento of contempt for people and nature, gambling with lives of hundreds of thousands of people, preferring political interests over the human ones. After having experienced this catastrophe, she is no more able to believe completely all the things we are told about perfect security of nuclear power plants...

* name changed at the request of the interviewee