

HANS PETER MÜLLER, Switzerland



Mr. Müller was 41 years old at the time of the accident. He was married, had two teenage children and held a teaching position in psychology. He believes that Chernobyl was a turnaround in the attitude of Swiss people towards NPPs and to energy matters in general. The interview was conducted by Lorenz Hilfiker, whose father used to work with Mr. Müller.

I meet Hans Peter Müller (66) on a Thursday afternoon in his row house near the University area of Bern. He percolates a coffee for me and then we sit down in the living room. I introduce him shortly into our project which he seems quite interested in. Hans Peter Müller is a former boss of my father's but I have just seen him once so far.

Hans Peter Müller was born at Langenthal close to Bern. After finishing school he attended the teacher's seminary and became a primary school teacher. Right afterwards he went on to study psychology and worked in clinical psychological research at the University of Bern for more than a decade. He also finished training in psychotherapy and held a teaching position in psychology at a teacher's seminary. In September 1986 he was elected headmaster of the teacher's seminary Marzili in Bern. Since 2000 he has held the position of rector of the Pedagogical University of Bern.

Hans Peter Müller is married and has two children who were 10 and 12 years old in 1986. The family used to live and he still lives in a cosy detached flat in the University area of Bern. Besides his own family, Müller names his three brothers, his neighbours as well as his research team at University as his main social environment in 1986. Politically, Müller has been a member of the Social Democratic Party since the Seventies.

Asked about his previous knowledge on nuclear power and radioactivity, he slightly grins. A memory crosses his mind: When he was a student in the early seventies, he used to test pharmaceutical products for the pharmaceutical industry. A lot of students gained some money by doing this, he explains. He just had to swallow the medicine and report what he felt afterwards. Once he was asked whether he was also prepared to take radioactive pills in order to find out how quickly the organism would get rid of it. Despite the fact that he was offered an almost enormous salary of 100 CHF a day, he wasn't suspicious in the slightest and seized that opportunity. It was just a bit weird because he had to collect his excrements in a bag all day so that it could be analysed later on.

Radioactivity and nuclear power had certainly never been an issue at school, Müller says. He didn't really know what happened within a NPP. When reflecting the establishment of the first NPP Mühleberg near Bern in the early Seventies he merely remembers the various discussions in the media about the possible impact on the temperature of the river Aare [Mühleberg's cooling is based on water of the river instead of a cooling tower]. He was conscious about the fact that there was produced waste, however he never thought about this as a big problem and he apparently didn't know about the long lifetime of the waste. He also knew that there was some dangerous radiation. "We knew about the atomic bombs, after all..." But the safety issue was no issue to be discussed.

In the early Eighties, Müller shared some concerns over NPPs. At that time, there was quite a powerful Anti-NPP movement in Switzerland which even managed to prevent an NPP at Kaiseraugst near Basel from being built. Moreover, the Social Democrats had always been sceptical about NPPs. However, Müller points out that his own and the Social Democrats' sceptical attitude at that time was driven rather by social than ecological arguments. There were just a few people making profit with the NPPs and the nuclear power issue therefore was kind of a class issue in the view of the Social Democrats.

Müller also experienced the Anti-NPP movement at that time as a mixture of local resistance, this general anti-establishment attitude and a general scepticism against “more and more energy production without asking what it actually meant.” Safety concerns played a minor role in Müller’s opinion and the question of waste was just no issue.

Did he never consider the accidents at Lucens [Switzerland, 1967] and Harrisburg [USA, 1979]? Not really. He knew about both, but he could barely imagine what had actually happened in both of these cases. He deems the fact that he didn't know about any deaths in Harrisburg to be the reason for not taking further notice of that accident. In case of Lucens [Swiss test reactor in a cave completely out of control; greater damage could be prevented by immediately bricking up the cave] which was years earlier, he just remembers having thought: "What, bricked up!? How much tax money have they buried there?"

Hans Peter Müller heard of Chernobyl in the Radio. He isn't sure anymore which day it was nor which time of the day. But he remembers that they announced the release of an immense radioactive cloud, whatever that exactly was. During the following days it soon became clear that Switzerland could be affected too. One thing Müller remembers is that suddenly in the media everybody was talking and writing "about these Becquerels – nobody really knew what it exactly meant and what these Becquerels were supposed to do with you. Every day they announced how much Bequerel were measured here and there. I think it was about Caesium, isn't it? And every day they discussed whether the cloud would reach the country or not. It was the Bodensee (Lake Constance) region which was mostly in the news because I think it was in most immediate danger to be affected by the cloud." So it finally was and Müller remembers that the fishes in the Bodensee "got a bit too much of these Becquerels, didn't they?"

Müller’s most present memory of these first days and weeks after the accident is the authorities advising people not to eat any lettuce. He repeats that several times. However, being asked whether they didn't eat any salad at all, he is not quite sure. "I guess so." He explains that not the mere fact of not being allowed to eat lettuce is what he remembers best, but rather the feeling connected with it: The feeling to be powerless towards something that had been released miles and miles away. The feeling that everybody was powerless. However, Müller says, he was not really afraid, not even for his children.

Of course, the accident was discussed among people and was issue no. 1 in the media for quite some time. But mostly, Müller remembers, it was just covered from the national point of view: Would Switzerland be affected? How much? What would this mean for us? On the one hand he remembers the TV scenes of liquidators trying to brick up the leaking reactor and everybody hoping that they would succeed quickly. On the other hand he doesn't remember any media really bothering about the situation in the most affected regions. Neither did he. Much of the knowledge about the hundreds of deaths, the deformities of children, the cancer, the removed people and the heavily contaminated landscapes he attained much later, often only in the nineties.

The way in which Hans Peter Müller’s life was most directly affected by the accident is his passion for picking mushrooms. Within several years after the accident mushroom-pickers were advised not to eat particular sorts and not to eat more than 200 g mushrooms per month. This fact always reminded him of the accident.

Apart from that, he quite quickly forgot about it as soon as it was not in the daily news anymore. Hans Peter Müller has rarely been faced with the accident over the past twenty years. He is not aware of any commemoration activities. Sometimes he thinks of it because of the nuclear power debate. Sometimes, he reads an article in a newspaper which reminds him. "In the nineties, there was a lot about those children from Chernobyl", the children which came to Switzerland for a holiday on private initiative.

Nevertheless he thinks that Chernobyl left traces in his memory as well as in society. "There was this demonstration on the Bundesplatz [in front of the government and parliament house]; I think it was on the occasion of commemorating Chernobyl one year after the accident." He was there and it was "quite chaotic, probably not an allowed demonstration. The police had no better idea than to cover the whole crowd with tear gas. They couldn't afford something like that nowadays..." He found himself at a fountain washing his eyes together with one of the young teachers of his school. This one told him how cool he deemed it that even the headmaster was there to demonstrate.

Müller thinks that Chernobyl was a turnaround in the attitude of Swiss people towards NPPs and energy matters in general. "In review, I think, this particular demonstration may have enforced the people's mistrust against the governmental position on these matters." Since Chernobyl, Müller argues, the arguments against NPPs became more and more ecological. (However, according to Müller the waste issue was still not very present until the mid nineties). It was also the time of the Green party to have its first successes.

Chernobyl did not directly influence Müller's energy consumption at that time. It was still a time, he explains, when they thought that not the energy consumption itself should be argued about but the way the energy was gained. It seemed easy just to change the energy sources to renewables. At his school, there were some projects, e. g. of a physics teacher who conducted "energy weeks" and things like that which Müller supported with school money. This teacher, he emphasizes, "had always been against NPPs."

In conclusion, I want to know: What is Mr Müller's most important memory about Chernobyl? The lettuce, he says! He seems glad when I tell him that other people had told me exactly the same thing.

*Interview: Lorenz Hilfiker*