

Frank*, Germany



Frank was 30 when the accident in Chernobyl happened. He remembers that people in East Germany were told that all foods were safe, while they saw on TV that West German farmers destroyed their whole harvest by plowing the fields. This and other memories he shared in an interview with Rebecca Hartje who is his son's girl friend.

Family background of the time witness

Frank was born on September 6th 1955 in Stassfurt (then East Germany) as one of two twin boys. He has an older sister. Frank went to the Polytechnische Oberschule and graduated after 10th grade, comparable to what today is called a "Realschulabschluss". After this he studied Physics and Math to become a teacher.

He left Calbe (Saale) in 1972 and studied in Halle until 1978. Thereafter, Frank was a teacher in Glesin until he got to know his later wife Petra in 1980. They married in the same year and moved to Magdeburg, where he lives up until today. In 1982, Frank's first son Steffen was born and at the end of March 1986 his second son Dirk followed.

After he had moved to Magdeburg, Frank became an accountant for SKET in Magdeburg, a state-owned company building large machinery. After a very heavy accident in the winter of 1984/85, the most important thing for Frank in the beginning of 1986 was that he could work full time again after he had spent almost a full year recovering. The most important people in his life back then were his wife and sons. They lived in a very old building in the city

in the backyard of another house with charcoal heaters. Their living conditions were not the best, but socially this made not a big difference. Social contacts largely took place within the extended family and another married couple. Due to secret service activities people were very careful about what they said in public, e.g. when talking to colleagues and acquaintances.

The knowledge about and the attitude towards nuclear energy before the Chernobyl accident

Frank studied Physics and thus had some knowledge about nuclear physics. In the GDR there was a reactor used for scientific purposes in Rossendorf and a nuclear power station was planned in Stendal. Most people were very proud of this as it showed the technological advancement of the country and according to Frank it was a great honor to work on this prestigious project and everybody would have wanted to work there.

People knew there was some kind of danger to this form of energy, mostly from West German TV because there were protests against nuclear power in the west, however, what exactly the dangers were and how an accident would affect lives and health was unknown, at least to Frank. In the GDR there were no protests, people were rather proud of the technology and the latent danger was not taken too seriously, maybe also because there was no exact information available. Personally, Frank was not afraid of nuclear energy because he trusted in the government and the physicists working on it that any precaution would be taken so that nothing happened, even though there could not be 100% safety.

The anxious atmosphere concerning nuclear energy in West Germany did not spread in East Germany. Even East German environmentalists rather focused on dying trees and chemical pollution. A nuclear accident was not an issue at that time, neither in public, nor in private. Generally, in East Germany people learned about radioactivity in school, first in 6th grade about nuclear energy and its use, for example in power stations or icebreakers (the peaceful use was stressed!) and later in 10th grade about nuclear physics. Other than from school people were informed about it through West German TV which was largely watched (even though officially forbidden).

The Chernobyl accident and its direct consequences, how the time witness experienced it

Frank doesn't have a very clear memory about the moment he got to know about the accident. He assumes this must have been while watching West German TV as this was where he got most of his information from. In East Germany, mainly ARD and ZDF could be viewed, other western programs were not available. He remembers that people listened attentively to the news, which came in at a high frequency. People were concerned about the radioactive cloud and followed especially any news about the weather. So was Frank.

At that time there was an eastern Version of the Tour de France, the so-called Friedensrundfahrt through Warsaw, Prague and Berlin taking place every May. That very year this Friedensrundfahrt was supposed to take a one-time a detour to Kiev. All racing cyclists and their bikes were supposed to be taken to Kiev by plane to race through the city. Frank remembers discussing openly with friends and colleagues about whether the cyclists should be exposed to the risk of nuclear damage after the accident had happened not too far from Kiev. They discussed whether the cyclists should be taken there at all or whether they could be protected somehow, e.g. through protective clothing.

Furthermore, Frank remembers that in the GDR the people were told that all foods were safe, while they saw on TV that West German farmers destroyed their whole harvest for that summer by plowing the fields. People in the east were unsettled by this; however, Frank reports that they did not change anything in their diet. He was also not especially afraid about the health of his two little sons and they were given the same milk to drink and the same vegetables and meats they had always gotten. Even though he thought that this radioactive cloud would not stop at the border and that thus, eastern German produce would be contaminated like the western German produce was, he also trusted in the government not to poison its population. So, he thought, plowing fields was a bit too much of a panic reaction.

Asked about what kind of damage he was afraid of and how he thought damage would happen, Frank said that he was in fear of contaminated air and that one could catch something that would have effects on one's health in the long run. Apart from that he did not think of any actual disease or a specific effect. He thought about whether certain clothing could protect people. Apart from this, everyday life went on like it always did and he or his family did not change any habits. The kids played outside like they always did.

Frank remembers further that after the first few days of anxiety people calmed down and said to themselves that they had already endured much and that they would endure this, too. It was some kind of fatalism that spread. East German media mentioned the accident but there were no special reports on TV and media coverage was way less dramatic than in the west. Maybe, as Frank puts it, journalists were too afraid of the government to speak freely. People said something like: "We eat these things and we are still alive, so the people in the west can do that, too. No need of plowing fields."

In his social surroundings people's attitude towards nuclear power did not change after the accident. However, there was a public discussion about the accident. In this, nobody gave Russia the fault of the accident. As people said it could have happened anywhere. Privately, however, at least Frank thought that Russia was not exactly famous for its safety standards. About this he also talked with his family.

Mainly, the discussion was not a technical one anyways; it rather focused on the humanitarian catastrophe and the "poor people". The environmentalists also did not change their activities, at least to Frank's knowledge. Thus, he states the accident did not change the public opinion about nuclear energy a lot in East Germany.

The credibility of the East German media was not the best at that time. People would rather trust western media from their past experience. However, the panic created by some media was seen critically, while the facts were welcome. In the East German media there was also information about the accident but nothing people had not already known from the west. Frank said he knew that there must have been some dead but he did not know anything more specific, there was no information about this. He did not know anybody living closer to the place of the accident and was never concerned to find out about whether he had gotten any physical damage from the accident.

In which context where Chernobyl and the nuclear energy issue important in the further life of the time-witness?

After the wall had come down, Frank had something to do with a club called "Help for Chernobyl" which supported victims of the accidents, mostly children which had been born after the accidents and suffered from various diseases associated with exposure to higher levels of radioactivity. Working for a Ministry in Saxony-Anhalt he was in charge of deciding whether the club would get some government funds. Other than that he had no further contact with the aftermath of the accident.

Frank perceives the media and people in Germany as pretty neutral towards the issue of nuclear energy. However, in his personal surroundings he observed some change after the federal government decided to prolong the use of nuclear energy in Germany. This concern is rather about what will happen in the future and not so much about today's situation. In his eyes, the main problem is not the power stations but what will happen with the nuclear waste as there is no solution to this yet.

Personally Frank has not and does not want to change his energy consumption habits. He did not change any of his priorities, although he admits that Chernobyl was some kind of signal to him and maybe also to the society, as people have generally become more careful and concerned about the subject, but there is no such thing as fear, rather a better trust in Germany and its nuclear power stations.

The importance of Chernobyl today

To Frank, Chernobyl means an accident through a chain of unfortunate circumstances. In his opinion it should teach us to stick to precautionary measures even though one might think that they are not necessary. We should remember this accident and never lose caution even though we think something is safe. However, one should not panic, especially in Germany we have pretty high safety standards. Frank says that Chernobyl did not really change anything in his life. He only thinks about the Chernobyl accident when he happens to see it in the media.

There was one point in time when Frank searched for more information about Chernobyl, that was when he decided about giving funds to the club helping children affected by the accident. However, this did not change any of his views towards the catastrophe.

To Frank's knowledge there are not special ways of remembering Chernobyl in Saxony-Anhalt. He says that he has not noted any of this sort yet, other than that there are a number of projects like the one he decided to give funds to, where children and their mothers come to Germany in the summer to spend some time here and recover.

The interview took part on the second day of Christmas 2010 in the study and dining room of the interviewee's apartment in Magdeburg.

*Surname omitted at the request of the interviewee