

Antonella Malanga, Itlay



In 1986, Antonella Malanga was 22 years old and she was planning her marriage. She remembers watching the weather forecast on TV to follow the movement of the radioactive cloud. She also remembers how her town showed its solidarity with the Ukraine. The interview was conducted by her daughter Marica De Natale.

The person I've decided to interview is my mother. Our discussion took place on a cold afternoon in December surrounded by a warm and pleasant atmosphere in the living room of my house. My mother was very interested in doing this sort of "time travel" through her memories. We sat on our sofa with soft background music.

### **The familiar background of the time-witness**

Antonella Malanga was born on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1964 in Potenza, a town in the South of Italy. Her family was composed of her father, her mother, two brothers and one sister. Her father worked at the post office while her mother was a school teacher that unfortunately died because of a terrible cancer when Antonella was just eighteen. Her family was very open and close to the civil and moral values of that time. It was also actively involved in the political field. In fact, her father was the mayor of her little town for many years. Every member of her family played an instrument and every day their house, and also the neighborhood, was all time animated by different kind of music.

Antonella finished her high school diploma with a specialization in surveying. She would have studied architecture but she couldn't continue her studies at University because after her mother's death she had to take care of her little brother who was only two years old.

In 1987 she got married and she had two children, a daughter and a son that now are 21 and 16 years old. For a couple of years she worked as a surveyor in an office and now she is an employee in a call center of the biggest Italian telephone company "Tim".

### **Knowledge and attitude towards nuclear energy before Chernobyl**

Before the accident in 1986, Antonella remembers that she didn't have a particular interest or attitude towards nuclear energy. Her knowledge was linked to what she learnt at school and it was mainly represented by concepts and vague notions. She says that most of people like her used to link the word "nuclear" both to the progress and to the war: it represented one of no-polluted energy for future even if nobody could have ignored all the risks linked to the nuclear and to its use in war. In fact, in addition to the idea of nuclear as an energy source, the world had already experienced its non-civil use first with the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and then with the Cold War which was still threatening the World with the arms race during those years. Therefore the most of people looked at nuclear energy both as a new energy source and as a threat that could seriously change the world.

### **Description of how the Chernobyl catastrophe was experienced and what its direct consequences were**

In 1986, when the terrible accident in Chernobyl happened, Antonella was 22 years old. At that time she was planning her marriage and she didn't have particular interest in nuclear energy. She knew that Italy had its own NPP but they seemed to be quite far from her home town to represent a serious threat for her and her family.

According to Antonella, before the accident the lack of a good knowledge about nuclear energy and its use was also due to political interests: in fact, politicians and also media didn't use to deal with this topic probably to not create preoccupation among people and keep the situation under control.

In addition to this Antonella remembers that six years before, in 1980, there was a terrible earthquake in her town which destroyed the 90% of the houses; so in that period the population was mainly interested in reconstructing their houses and in resuming the economical and social life.

As soon as the accident happened, everything suddenly changed: people started to be afraid of the consequences and, even if at the beginning all the news from Chernobyl weren't clear and sometimes not true, everyone wondered what could happen to them and to the Earth. The radioactive cloud would move all over Europe and it could arrive in Italy, too.

During the he first days after the accident everyone was both shocked and confused, nobody could find an answer to what was happening in Chernobyl nor had any idea about the gravity of the catastrophe. Another thing that Antonella remembers is the strict and hostile behavior of Russian politicians on TV that continued to reassure people and sometimes to deny the accident.

Therefore, at first people believed that Chernobyl was far enough away to not be a serious threat for Italy. However, after no long time, the news and also the situation started to changed: Antonella remembers that, day by day, all the first doubts and "lies" turned into security measures

that everyone would have to take in Italy. For example, it was suggested to not drink fresh milk, fresh vegetables and in general to avoid everything that was linked to the food chain from every possible contaminated source such as air, water or ground.

When the news was confirmed, Antonella remembers that the name Chernobyl became part of her daily conversation with family or friends: all the doubts and fears increased especially when the media started to show the pictures from Chernobyl and also to report the first sad news of people who were ill or died because of radiations.

Everyone followed the weather forecasts that daily analyzed the movement of the radioactive cloud and the wind direction: this contributed to spreading a general sensation of “suspense” among people who felt powerless toward all the kind of visible and invisible damages that the nuclear catastrophe could have made to them and to the environment.

### **Context in which Chernobyl and the nuclear issues were important in Antonella’s life**

According to Antonella, the accident of Chernobyl had marked Italian history since 1986: people started to be seriously worried about the possible consequences that radiation could have caused to their health. The interest for the nuclear sector increased a lot and in Italy people suddenly showed their preoccupation with its strong position against the nuclear energy: in 1987 with a national referendum people voted in order to obtain the closure of all the NPP in our country.

Antonella expressed her vote against nuclear energy. She remembers the propaganda and all the strikes and campaigns that were organized before the vote. In her town there were also volunteers that raised money for the Ukrainian population and proposed to the citizens to offer hospitality to children during the summer. In fact, some volunteers left from her town to go to the Ukraine and bring children to Italy to offer them the possibility to avoid the radiation and to breathe “clean air”. All these initiatives involved also the habitants and their solidarity was very big; the mayor of the town and the municipality decided to create a twinning with the city of Narodichi in Ukraine to demonstrate their support despite of the distance.

Therefore, every summer Antonella’s town awaited the arrival of more than one hundred Ukrainian children who, hosted and welcomed with love, became part of the town during summer period for many years.

The fight of the anti-nuclear movements was won, the Italian people felt more reassured after the closure of the Italian NPP and according to Antonella, the success of the referendum also demonstrated how strong and serious the consideration of the accident in Italy was.

Now, Chernobyl is still deeply impressed in the memory of people as fear and pictures of a tragedy. Antonella remembers all the photos of the dark and gloomy atmosphere of the surrounding area close to the nuclear power plant, the stuck and lost eyes of people that couldn’t understand what was happening, the picture of all the brave experts who sacrificed themselves to put out the fire in the central reactor.

### **Opinion about the importance of Chernobyl today**

According to Antonella, today Chernobyl is still very important for everyone. It is a symbol which represents how mankind would be powerless towards the visible and invisible and what could be the possible risks and consequences if man decides to change the natural “invisible balance of the elements”.

The field of energy sources will be always deeply important for the society and even if the quality and the level of technology are improving, nobody would ever be completely sure of the real risks of nuclear energy. After 25 years, Chernobyl is still surrounded by mystery and unanswered questions, there are hidden and confused aspects that for the new generations could represent a reference to value the risks of nuclear energy and also be a way to stimulate the research of new alternative and non-polluted energy sources.