Susan Z. Ritz
szritz@gmail.com

# Our Chernobyl

From my window, I look out at Montpelier's empty streets, trying to tune out the COVID-19 news updates that ping and bing on my phone, asking myself why this all feels so eerily familiar. I know this jumble of emotions. Fear, helplessness, despair, and also the sense that we're all in this together. I've been through a spring like this before, locked down in my house, uncertain and confused, hoping for the best.

Thirty-four years ago, on April 26th, 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded eight-hundred and fifty miles from my home in Einsbach, a village near Munich, West Germany. For the next two weeks, invisible plumes carrying deadly radiation unfurled like poisonous ribbons in the skies over Europe. And just as the Chinese government hid the first reports of the novel corona virus, the Soviet authorities initially denied the accident, leaving us all unprepared for the fallout.

The first I heard even a hint of the accident in the Ukraine, was April 29th, three full days after the explosion. Ten weeks pregnant and still unaware that I was having twins, I sat at the kitchen table in our old farmhouse in the country, looking out the window and eating salty crackers to stave off a bout of morning sickness. On the radio, a brief and unremarkable news report claimed that mysteriously high levels of radiation had been detected in Scandinavia, found first on the shoes of workers at a nuclear plant in Sweden.

I paid more attention to the next story. Somewhere north of Belarus, the bones, feathers and flesh of a thousand migrating nightingales had been discovered on the scattered across acres of forest floor. This startling image, like some gruesome fairytale, has stuck with me for decades. Back then, it didn't occur to me that the two news reports were related. They seemed as inconsequential as those first whispers of a new virus spreading in some distant Chinese city.

I was more concerned about the storm blowing in. I watched my neighbor's wife running to shut the barn doors as the wind picked up and the first drops of rain spattered my windowpanes. With my three-year-old son Daniel tagging behind me, I dragged myself outside to retrieve the laundry I had just hung on the clothesline. As I threw tee-shirts, pajamas and towels into my wicker basket, the full force of the storm broke over me. Rain soaked my hair, ran down my neck, drenched my upraised arms. Daniel spun in circles, arms outspread, mouth open to catch the first warm rain of spring. I had no idea the sudden downpour carried some of the heaviest doses of radiation outside the Soviet Union.

At first, it didn't seem possible or logical that an accident that happened so far away could endanger my family. I had no idea that life around me was about to change in ways I couldn't yet imagine. In January this year as well, I had no idea that by late March, I would be locked down in my house, separated from friends and family, wearing a mask to go to the grocery store.

As more news slowly leaked out from behind the Iron Curtain and Europe began to track the rapid spread of radiation carried by unpredictable jet streams, the Chernobyl disaster claimed the headlines. In briefings on the nightly news, the German government spokesmen assured us there was nothing to worry about. We were told to wash our spinach and lettuce but were given no other directives.

It was a glorious spring, as it is now, six weeks into our national lock down. In Bavaria, we threw open our windows and spent our days outdoors. I remember sitting in the garden, drinking coffee with friends, as our children splashed in the puddles left by the rainstorm, discussing the few precautions the German government had issued. In addition to washing our greens, we had now been told to bathe our children thoroughly when they came in from play. Could we really just wash the whole problem away?

As the worst of the invisible radiation contaminated everything around us, the German government downplayed the danger to allay our fears. This January, listening to our leaders in Washington tell us the virus had been contained and there was nothing to worry about, I heard echoes of their ridiculous reassurance. On the evening news, the Bavarian minister for the environment drank milk from Bavarian cows to show he wasn't afraid of his state's most important export, urging us to "Drink up!" even as experts warned that the milk was dangerous. Another minister jumped fully clothed into a swimming pool. The water was harmless, he declared, even though an eminent scientist had called it a "biohazard" on the news only the night before. In the Munich paper, an ad from the West German equivalent of the AMA, claimed that according to scientific data, West German citizens faced no danger. Meanwhile, farmers were told to plow under their crops. All over the country, fields lay empty. Furrows of black loam where there should have been sugar beets and maize spoke louder than any officials' pronouncements, like news clips of overwhelmed hospitals and frightened nurses tell us all we need to know now.

Despite my fear and confusion, I still had a small measure of persistent, and now I think blind, faith that I was safe, and the government would protect me. Mounting evidence to the contrary, I was still unable to believe that West Germany's leaders had deliberately misled the

entire nation. It must not really be so bad, I reasoned as I half-heartedly followed the precautionary warnings. I stopped putting milk in my coffee, but I left the windows open and still dried my sheets on the line. In the garden, I turned over the soil and planted seeds while Daniel played with his trucks in the sandbox. I couldn't comprehend that radiation still circulated in the air nor that the toxic rain had poisoned everything we touched. There was nothing to see, no evidence of the disaster engulfing us, the contamination as invisible as the corona virus we face today.

On television today, I watch demonstrators outside state houses in Michigan, Minnesota and now even Vermont, waving American flags. They stand side by side rather than the prescribed six feet apart, only a few wearing facemasks, and I remember my own naivety. These Americans, too, want to believe politicians who purport to care about the health of the people. Like me back in 1986, they don't understand the danger in the air. They can't understand why the bottom has fallen out of their lives when Washington press briefings show our leaders standing shoulder to shoulder and shaking hands, no masks in sight.

For more than two weeks, Europe and the rest of the world waited for an official announcement of the accident to come from the Soviet Union. Soviet authorities had deliberately withheld warnings from their own citizens until after May Day when thousands lined the streets of Kiev, only sixty miles from the site of the melt down, for the annual military parade. That morning, a brigade of *babuschkas* were sent to sweep the parade route, stirring up clouds of radioactive dust later ingested by the unsuspecting spectators. Not until May 6th, did the government close schools in the Ukraine and warn residents to stay inside and away from leafy greens. On May 14th, a full eighteen days after the explosion, in a televised announcement,

President Gorbachev, at last admitted to the world that an accident had indeed occurred, saying "the worst is behind us."

That same day, in West Germany, after two weeks of rumor and confusion, I finally grasped the enormity of the disaster when, a scientist from the Max Plank Institute spoke on the effects of radiation at our local library. There, we began to learn the vocabulary of radiation—becquerels, half-lives, isotopes— as we now learn the language of COVID-19—social distancing, lockdown, and PPEs. He told us that the most vulnerable were fetuses now in the womb and young children, whose fast-growing bones and organs more readily absorbed the radioactive iodine and calcium. "If you were outside the first few days of May, you probably got the equivalent of five chest X-rays from breathing the air. Add to that any milk you drank, vegetables you ate…"

Fear, regret and anger coursed through the room of young parents as we thought back to those first warm days of spring we had relished in our gardens. I placed protective hands over my still flat belly. Pregnant women, I knew, weren't allowed to have dental x-rays, let alone chest x-rays! The scientist explained why we should stay away from fresh milk. It was loaded with iodine 131. He also told us to avoid fresh fruits or vegetables from anywhere in Europe. They were steeped in cesium 137. Don't let children play in sandboxes, which now held the highest levels of radiation yet found. Stay away from gardening, too. The topsoil was contaminated and might prove dangerous. Why hadn't someone told us this two weeks ago, I sobbed into my husband Johannes's shoulder, thinking about the contaminated milk my family had drunk, the toxic soil I had worked as I planted my garden, the poisonous puddles and sand I had allowed my son to play in.

I wanted to stand up and wail. I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life. I couldn't stop shaking. I was afraid I was going to throw up. The faces of the other young parents around me were pale and stricken as we took in the fact that, in our confusion, we may have irreparably harmed our children, our precious babies. And there was nothing we could do about it.

Like now, with so much contradictory information swirling around us and politics muddying the waters, it was hard to know who and what to believe. But sitting in that library, getting facts at last, I decided I would believe this man and finally accept that the West German leaders we relied on had hidden the truth. They were playing politics, more concerned with their plan to expand nuclear power than with public safety, like our leaders today are more concerned with economics and the coming election.

In 1986, energy policy was guiding the very different set of recommendations issued by various European governments. In Austria, a nuclear-free country run on hydropower, schools and playgrounds had immediately closed. Citizens were required to stay indoors. In France, which received sixty-five percent of its energy needs from nuclear plants, the population was told the plume had conveniently skipped over the whole country. West Germany, which already relied on nuclear power for one-third of its energy and planned on adding several new plants within the decade, started out by playing the middle ground, insisting we were safe until denial was no longer an option.

As the enormity of the disaster became clear, new restrictions and guidelines were put in place, just as in the age of COVID-19 we moved from recommendations to simply wash our hands and not touch our faces to enforced lockdowns and facemasks. We were warned to close our windows, stay inside, and take off shoes and outerwear before entering our homes if we had to go out. We spent our days looking out our windows, watching the glorious spring unfold. The

world outside teemed with life and color. The grass was such a vibrant green, my tulips a startling red. Had the radiation created this glow, or were we deceived by our longing for something forbidden, something both beautiful and dangerous? From the bedroom, I saw the sprouting vegetables I had unwittingly planted in toxic soil. I didn't yet realize that I would never eat from my own garden again. The downpour, which had hit us so hard, made Einsbach the most radiated village for miles.

Finding uncontaminated food became an obsession. The government now instructed pregnant women and children not to eat anything that had been packaged after April 29th, the day the deadly plume swept across West Germany. In supermarkets, stocks of ultra-pasteurized, non-refrigerated milk and frozen food with the safe expiration dates sold out immediately, leaving shelves as empty as shelves of cleaning and paper products are today. Though I had always bought most of our groceries from the local vegetable stand and butcher, I now looked for grapes from Chile and lamb from New Zealand to feed my family and nourish the babies I was carrying. Our choices were severely limited, not what a pregnant mother or a young child needed.

We decided it was time to get out of Germany and fly home to Minnesota at the end of May to wait while the worst of the radiation subsided. Back in the States, no one seemed to understand what we had been through or what still lay ahead for West Germany. Chernobyl was something that had happened far away, like the major COVID outbreaks in New York and Seattle seem somehow distant to us sheltered in Vermont where the incidence of the disease is low.

We returned to Germany in August, but there was no returning to normalcy. Finding uncontaminated food remained a problem, especially for young mothers like me and my friends. For the next three years, I dutifully took soil samples from my garden to the local butcher whose

Geiger counter revealed that radiation levels were still too high to for me to plant. I also took our milk and local vegetables, waiting his thumbs up or down. I bought only meat he certified to carry a safe dose of radiation. Fresh milk from my neighbors' dairy remained too contaminated to drink for another two years.

Like other young mothers, I roamed the supermarkets with my monthly copy of *Oeko-test*, a green *Consumers Report*s, which listed becquerel readings for processed food. Italian pasta, Turkish hazelnuts, Swiss milk chocolate were too highly radiated to buy. We searched local farms for bags flour that had been milled before the disaster. Mushroom gathering, formerly an annual family tradition, was out of the question as the radiation was highest in the forest soil. Meat from foraging animals like boar or deer, a festive meal for many Germans, remains off limits even today in corners of Bavaria like Einsbach, which we learned had received up to five hundred times the radiation of places where the hard rain did not fall.

No one will ever know the human toll of the Chernobyl accident. The official number of deaths is four thousand, but estimates range up to 200 thousand. We do know that those like me and my children who were caught in the rain still carry a higher level of radiation in our bodies than those who weren't. My identical twin daughters were born early but healthy in late October that year, but I worried always when they were growing up. A swollen lymph node, a lingering bruise, a persistent cold would keep me up at night. And Daniel? For years, I wondered what damage had been done as he splashed about in poisoned puddles. No one will ever know which cases of thyroid cancer or leukemia diagnosed in Germany over the last three decades were actually caused or influenced by Chernobyl. I live with lingering fear that is now part of my bones.

Today I am beset with a different set of fears. In the market, I am not afraid of the milk or the vegetables. Instead I am afraid of the unmasked shopper standing too close to me. Outside, walking in the park, I am not afraid of touching the plants or stirring up radioactive dust, but I steer clear of large groups of fellow walkers. Instead of fearing for my children's and grandchildren's future health, I fear for my ninety-one-year old mother, still living in far away in Minnesota. I fear for my dear friend undergoing chemotherapy, my cousin with debilitating Lyme disease, my seventy-two-year-old neighbor who smokes cigarettes.

My daughter, one of the twins, works in a nursing home and is now at the same stage of her pregnancy as I was during the Chernobyl disaster. I worry that she will get the virus and perhaps pass it on to her newborn. I also worry about the chromosomal damage I may have unwittingly caused to that child over thirty years ago by drinking milk and planting my garden. I do not mention this to my daughter.

I worry, too, for myself and my husband, at risk due to our ages. We wash our hands several times a day. I try not to touch my face, an impossible expectation. I disinfect my doorknobs and mailbox each morning. We wear homemade cloth masks when we go out. Our freezer is stocked with food, and we have plenty of toilet paper. We are lucky to live in Vermont, to have a garden and two hundred-acre park to roam with our dog every morning. We are lucky this time to be in the right place.

When I talk to friends in Germany, I ask if people are feeling the same sense of déjà vu that I am. No, they report. In fact, it hadn't occurred to them. This time, the German government is led by a chancellor who is also a scientist. The Germans receive straight forward and clear information about what they should be doing to protect themselves and their loved ones. Though the virus has officially hit over 100 thousand Germans, the death toll has been remarkably low

due to a robust healthcare system, widespread testing, and a compliant population that trusts its own leaders. As a result, the incidence of illness and death is by far the lowest in Europe.

Here at my desk in Vermont, I look out my window as new leaves burst forth on the trees. A flock of bright yellow goldfinches flit in and out of the branches, fattening up on my birdseed before migrating north. I can't help but wonder where we as a nation go from here. Often, I am afraid we are headed in the same direction as the Soviet Union. The Chernobyl catastrophe and ensuing cover-up were the first rent in the Iron Curtain. In 1986, no one guessed that only three years later, the Berlin Wall would fall. No one imagined five years later, in 1991, the mighty Soviet Union would collapse, breaking into fifteen separate states. Lies, ineptitude, and complete disregard for public health proved a lethal mix for a fractious country.

A similar scenario could easily play out in the US. We are at a low point in our history, beset by a destructive political divide and an inept, narcissistic, corrupt president. Like the Soviet Union near the end of its empire, we are burdened by the expense of war and resulting deterioration of our infrastructure and health care systems.

I hope I am wrong. I hope we will, instead, act on lessons learned, like Germany after Chernobyl, when the Green Party grew up, the fields filled with windmills, the rooftops sprouted solar panels. Where nuclear plants will be relics of the past by 2022.

Perhaps we will emerge from this pandemic and the resulting economic collapse with a greater awareness of the fault lines underlying our society and do more to heal our medical system, our racial divides, our dysfunctional democracy, and our economic inequality. Perhaps we will change our habits—travel less, work from home more, and limit industrial pollution to keep the clean air we are enjoying, giving us a small chance to slow climate change. Maybe we will recognize how much we depend on each other and become a more compassionate country.

No matter the eventual outcome, we will all have our stories of this pivotal moment in history—like Chernobyl— when the future was up for grabs.