

October 23, 1988

The Boston Globe
135 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, Massachusetts 02107

To The Editor:

I am writing to express my concern that the long hot summer we recently experienced may effect the voters when faced in November with the question of nuclear power in New England. Although it's clear that we had a taste of what life could be like if we continue to upset earth's delicate ecological balance, I think it's dangerous to decide that there are only two alternatives, and to reject whichever is more blatantly touching our lives at the time. Because few of us have had the experience of what it's like to live through a nuclear accident, the public may not feel the urgent need to put a stop to it until irreparable damage has been done. I am not writing to discuss how we should resolve the problems with our various technologies, but rather to share my experience of living in western Europe at the time of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, in the hopes that people may decide not to risk ever having to live through it themselves.

The weekend that the news started filtering in about a cloud of radiation heading our way, I was with my husband and our musical group, finishing up a four night stint in northern Germany. The information began sketchily, as the Soviet Union didn't confess what had happened until Scandinavian radiation detectors started to show huge amounts of radiation in the air around their own plants. When they confirmed that it wasn't coming from inside, it was determined to be blowing in from their next-door neighbor, and eventually the Soviets released an accurate account of the accident.

When we first heard the news we were shocked, but the true significance didn't hit until we were driving home to Marburg, the city of 60,000 where we lived in central Germany. We had been listening to the news off and on all day as reports came in, and we knew we were driving into one of the more affected areas. Then we started hearing the warnings: parents should keep their children inside, milk and fresh produce should not be consumed. Suddenly I felt like I was living through a science fiction movie, that this couldn't really be happening. Rain was forecast and as we looked around at the newly planted fields we prayed it would hold off until the cloud blew over, but Germany is a rainy place and there was little chance that it would.

It was that evening, after attending a demonstration which was ironically broken up when the first drops of radioactive rain started falling, that I began to realize the significance of that spring shower. It would clear the air we breathed, but it brought with it something that contaminated everything it touched: the sprouting vegetables, the livestock feed, the very soil itself. Since the Soviets had taken so long to give the warning, cows had already eaten radioactive grass and given radioactive milk, chickens were laying radioactive eggs, and meat animals were already inedible. Later, of course, much food had to be destroyed. The farmers lost all their crops and experienced incredible financial hardship, requiring emergency aid from the government. I'll never forget the first time I went shopping after the accident. I stood in the produce department almost in tears, realizing that there was little I could eat that wasn't carcinogenic. Spain was not affected, so we bought as much Spanish produce as possible, along with powdered milk and frozen meat. There were signs on various ~~things~~ *items* for weeks telling the level of radiation.

Two things came into play that affected all the information we received. The first is that even now scientists don't really know that much about radiation levels and don't agree on what's safe and what isn't. And the second factor is that political motivations inevitably color the reports given to us. Lets take the allowable level of radiation per litre of milk. After the Three Mile Island accident, the US government set the safe level at 15 procuries per litre. After Chernobyl, the German state of Hessen, where we were living at the time, and which has a coalition government with The Greens (a party that runs on an ecological platform), set safe levels at 20 procuries, a much lower level than the 500 procuries set by the pro-nuclear Federal government. Poland, which was incredibly hard hit, being that much closer to the accident, set the level at 1000 per litre, and the French, who get 65% of their power from nuclear, set the limit at 2000. It's not that the milk there had that much, but they weren't taking any chances of losing support for nuclear power by admitting there might be some danger.

Most of the radiation we recieved at that time was Iodine 131, *isotopes* which has a half life of 8 days. But much of it was also ~~things~~ with a much longer life, like Cesium, which has a half life of 30 years, and ~~Strontium~~ Strontium, hundreds of times more than that. I comforted myself with the fact that I'd be moving away, that I wouldn't be living there my whole life and consuming low level radiation year after year. (The newspapers there still print a weekly list of foods that should be avoided, and that's after 2 years). But everyone can't move out of the country like we did.

And I felt so bad for the pregnant women and nursing mothers who knew that everything they ate could be contaminating their babies. For several weeks during that time I felt an incredible sadness for the whole world. This stuff doesn't just go away. If it blows away it ends up somewhere else, if it washes away it just appears in someone else's back yard. Those of us born since 1950 already have a greater risk of dying of cancer because we've grown up in the nuclear age, with bomb testing and "minor" nuclear accidents that have contaminated in small (and not so small) amounts since 1956. It just keeps adding up, and if another one goes...

And now people are deciding that maybe nuclear power isn't so bad and we have to do something about the green house effect so why not just trust that nothing is going to go wrong, that we can contain the nuclear waste, that there won't be another accident. Well, I can't count on that. I know what it's like to take your shoes off at the door for weeks because you're trying to track as little as possible of this invisible and insidious stuff into your and your friends' living spaces, to put your clothes in plastic bags when you come inside, take your third shower of the day and heat up something frozen for lunch while the cat wonders why you won't let her out and then won't pat her when you finally do. I never want to go through anything like that again. And the experiences I describe were those experienced living 800 miles away from Chernobyl! I live 45 miles from Plymouth and I don't even want to think about how much worse it could have been 750 miles closer. For you reading this it may seem like some fantasy that can't happen here. But unfortunately, as long as creatures as flawed as we are playing with something as powerful as nuclear forces, we can't assume that everything will be just fine. Will you remember that on November 9th?

Sincerely,

to

those of

Luanne Crosby
61 Hundreds Road
Wellesley, MA 02181