

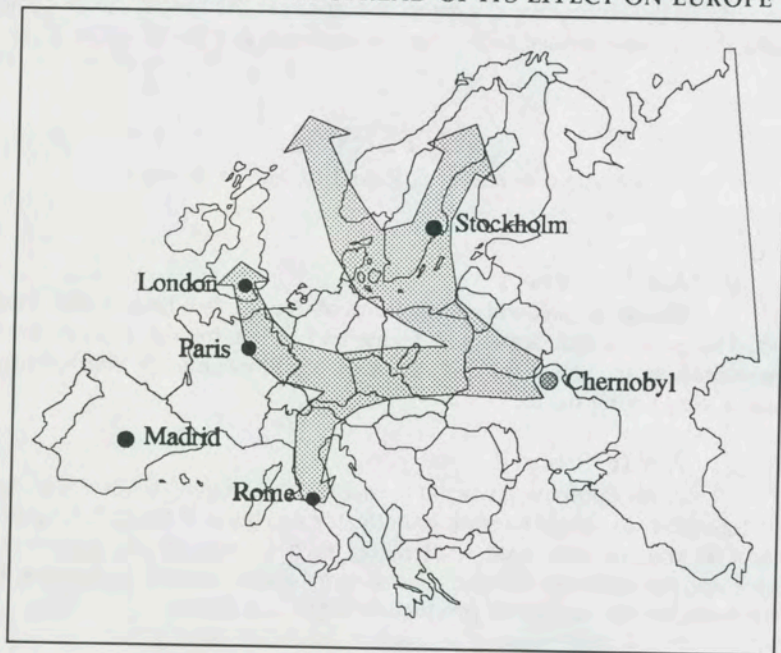
Act II, Scene 3

The doctors discuss the problems facing them. The director is in need of a bone-marrow transplant, however there appears to be no suitable donor. There is an announcement that Kyle, an American professor, is coming for a visit. The Russians are keen to impress the American but it is evident that Ptitsyna is bitter over the fact that they are always used as guinea-pigs and that the Americans copy Russian ideas, taking the credit themselves. She feels indignant about the Russians never being given credit for their achievements.

We learn that Kyle has brought his children to Russia with him, together with half a million dollars' worth of medicine. He is determined to show the world what has happened.

Bessmertnyi decides to donate some of his bone-marrow to save the director in order that he can survive. Then, according to Bessmertnyi, at least someone will be left to take responsibility for such a horrific, preventable disaster.

CHERNOBYL AND THE SPREAD OF ITS EFFECT ON EUROPE



SOVIET NEWS REPORTS ON THE EVENT

Although the Chernobyl accident actually took place on April 26th 1986, there was no mention of it in the news until April 30th, four days later. In the face of fact finding problems and contradictory accounts, the Soviet media were able to make sparse but fairly accurate reports.

April 30th

A 10cm x 20cm (4" x 8") slot on page two of *Izvestia* acknowledged a nuclear reactor accident in Chernobyl. No idea of scale was given, and information was extremely limited: there were two victims, nearby residents had been evacuated, constant monitoring was in operation and radiation had been stabilized.

"According to Socrates, all our troubles stem from ignorance."

Bessmertnyi; Act I, scene 2

May 1st

The authorities gave reassurances that radiation levels had been reduced and only two have died, 197 hospitalized, of which 49 have been discharged.

May 2nd

An article in *Pravda* announced that radiation had been reduced by between a third and a half, and adjacent areas to the accident were being decontaminated.

May 4th

Pravda and *Izvestia* both reported on the sending of two men from the Central Committee to assess the disaster zone and rescue operation.

May 6th

The first on-the-spot report from the disaster area. *Pravda* reported of a previously bustling industrial town now completely deserted - a ghost town. The first report on what actually happened that night came out. The disaster was described as "a complicated and extraordinarily difficult, but controllable situation". The Russian press began to accuse the foreign, particularly European, press of panicking and gloating over the misfortune.

May 7th

Izvestia reported on events: a blaze in reactor four, too hot to be fought with water or chemicals, reinforcement fire-fighters had to be brought in. The fire was put out. Evacuation of an area 30km around the station was carried out.



May 13th

Izvestia reported that the death toll was now six, with 35 others in a serious condition.

May 15th

Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev finally made a televised speech concerning the affair. He accused the international press of slander and asserted that there was no shortage of information, it just took time to assess the problem properly. The Russian press cited other accidents which did not receive such attention, e.g. Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania, on 28th March 1979 and at Dungeness in Kent. (The latter 'accident' consisted only of the detection of cracks in the two reactors, resulting in the temporary closure of the plant but no deaths or injuries).

"People should be given more information, especially those living near to nuclear stations. The more information they have, the more prepared they will be. What happened at Chernobyl could happen in any country. . ."

Elena Vladimirovna Vasil'eva

ENGLISH NEWS REPORTS ON THE EVENT

News was slow in coming in and reports varied greatly according to their source. The news broke in the following erratic and at times self-contradictory manner.

April 29th

Reports of the world's worst nuclear accident at Chernobyl, a Soviet plant in Pripiat, the Ukraine, only 15-20 miles from Kiev.

A full scale alert occurred up to 1,000 miles away and fallout was recorded 700 miles away. Radiation levels soared in Europe, Finland records levels six times higher than usual, Denmark five times higher and Norway 50% higher.

The Soviet authorities denied the accident before admitting a reactor was damaged causing casualties, whom they were helping.

Swedish authorities gave more speculative information: an explosion was caused by the overheating of nuclear fuel causing a "meltdown" of the nuclear core of the reactor.

A government enquiry was set up while the Soviet news agency, TASS, reported that this was the first accident of its kind and there was no danger to human beings. According to the National Radiological Protection Board the level of fallout called for an all-



out evacuation of the area, the sheltering of the public and the issuing of iodine tablets.

April 30th

First recordings of the accident were on Monday April 28th when the National Defence Research Institute in Stockholm opened and they found records of radiation dating from 2pm on Sunday.

Reports varied wildly with no solid facts from the Soviets. TASS called the situation stable while other sources reported a fire still raging out of control. The accident was explained by the "destruction of part of the structural elements of the building housing the reactor, its damage, and a certain leak of radioactive substances". This affected the Number Four reactor in the Chernobyl complex. Casualties varied greatly according to sources:

Soviet Official: less than 100 affected, including those injured.

Scottish teacher in Kiev: reports of up to 300 dead.

American News Agency: reports of up to 2,000 dead.

A Kiev Resident: 10-15,000 evacuated from Pripiat: 80 died immediately and 2,000 on the way to hospital. The Soviet Minister for Aviation said "Western reports are exaggerated".

May 1st

A Soviet official report of the accident came out: 200 were taken to hospital, but most were subsequently released. There was a "partial evacuation" of the area. On the Friday they experienced problems with reactor four and so closed it down. On the Saturday a loss of coolant led to overheating of the core which in turn caused the rupture of pressure tubes and escape of superheated steam which reacted with the graphite cladding to cause a chemical explosion. Hard facts were difficult to come by as the Kremlin placed a 100 mile exclusion zone around the area for reporters and diplomats. Due to the lack of information flow many Russians believed that all the Western reports were merely trying to paint a black picture of Russia and communism.

May 2nd

British students in Kiev only found out about the accident on Tuesday 29th April, and then only from Western reports. TASS said that 18 Russians were now in a serious condition while all the foreigners were safe. When interviewed a Russian said "We have been told there is nothing to worry about, and that is what we believe. It is people in the West who hate communism who are telling lies about thousands of people dying".

May 4th

Reports that 49,000 people had been evacuated and the local water supply was now polluted.



WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN?

Before 1986 few had heard of Chernobyl. In April of that year it became a household name. What of 1992? Are we sufficiently aware, six years on, of the Chernobyl disaster and the issues it has raised?

It is impossible, as *Slavonica* staff have found, to present the truth of what happened and its terrible consequences without sounding pessimistic. We in Britain have been made aware of the truth to an extent that perhaps we take for granted: we have been told that the effects of that fateful day in 1986 in a hitherto unknown town in the Ukraine will ultimately affect the health of many thousands of people all over the globe. We may wish that the truth was not so dire, but nevertheless these are the facts.

However, overriding the fear we naturally have for ourselves and our families should be compassion for those who are already suffering, horribly and inescapably, and who will continue to suffer the consequences more than anyone else: the people of the former Soviet Union, especially of Belorussia and the Ukraine.

Slavonica correspondents were recently given the opportunity to interview Elena Vladimirovna Vasil'eva, a Russian woman currently living here in Nottingham. She came to England from Moscow with her husband, who is working in the Physics Department at the University, and her two daughters aged five and eleven.

To begin, Elena Vladimirovna was asked when she first heard of the Chernobyl disaster and her reply was very interesting: she heard two days after the disaster actually happened, but neither from the press nor from the television, just from rumours which were circulating. No-one knew anything precise. However, at the beginning of May Elena read a small article in the newspaper and saw a short item on the television which simply stated that there had been an explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station: nothing more was said. In fact, very little information was given at all and the scale of the disaster was not known. Elena told us that all over Moscow people were very worried because of the rumours.

At the time of the explosion Elena Vladimirovna was living in Moscow but her husband and oldest daughter had gone to visit her mother-in-law in Rostov-on-Don, a town which is nearer to Chernobyl than Moscow itself. This worried her immensely.



When asked what the general reaction of people to the news was, Elena Vladimirovna proceeded to tell us that in the beginning it was one of incomprehension: they were frightened and confused.

They asked each other questions as the government offered little advice and gave no precise answers. People were unsure of what they should do and whether or not the food products in their region would be contaminated.

At this point we asked Elena Vladimirovna whether she herself feared for her family, especially her children. Her immediate fear had been for her husband and daughter in Rostov-on-Don: she worried that being nearer to the Ukraine they might be in greater danger. The news had not reached Rostov, though, and when father and daughter returned to Moscow at the beginning of May, Elena told her husband what she had heard. His reaction was that she had either got the story wrong or was exaggerating it!

The next evening, however, he came home from work with the news that he and his fellow physicists had been able to measure the strength of the emission as ten times that of Hiroshima in 1945. In fact, scientists have subsequently come to believe that it was equal to ninety Hiroshimas. The most serious problem was, they felt, this high level of radiation pollution.

On hearing what her husband told her, Elena Vladimirovna now worried in earnest. She told us that friends in Belorussia have had to face the problem of their children becoming sick. Some have emigrated to Germany because to stay in Belorussia with sick children presents such difficulties. Children would complain that they felt very tired and suffered headaches and nausea. We now know from media reports that leukaemia has become a problem among children, and doctors are baffled by a mysterious baldness occurring in children also.

Finally we put two rather sensitive questions to Elena Vladimirovna and she frankly gave us her personal opinions. First of all, we asked how she felt the press and government in her country had handled the situation. It is true, she said, that there had been very little information given. These were the days before glasnost, of course, when people were not at liberty to discuss certain issues openly. It seems to Elena Vladimirovna that Chernobyl was the first event about which people actually started to talk freely among themselves, and it

"My personal opinion is that Chernobyl was the first event that people started to talk freely about. . . then they seemed to be more open about other subjects which previously had been forbidden."

Elena Vladimirovna Vasil'eva



apparently broke the ice, because they then appeared to be more open about other subjects, previously taboo.

As for the government, it did little to help people at a time when it really should have done. But, being realistic, what was required was the means to help the victims, and such resources as, for example, that ever-important commodity, money, have not been sufficiently available, Elena Vladimirovna explained.

In answer to our question "What lessons can be learned from Chernobyl?" Elena Vladimirovna stressed that people should be adequately informed about such things, especially those who live near to nuclear stations. The more information they have, the more prepared the people will be. What happened at Chernobyl could happen in any country so people must know what to do.

"But Nadezda has gone. . . Nadezhda means 'hope'. How can we survive without hope?"

Bessmertnyi; Act I, scene 3

We thanked Elena for talking to us so openly on this very emotive subject.

To dismiss the Chernobyl disaster as dead history would be foolhardy. The moment the explosion occurred a train of results was set in motion that will not simply disappear. People have already died, and thousands more will die, directly or indirectly because of Chernobyl. Tragically, it is too late to reverse this fact.

The time is well overdue for each one of us to behave as responsible custodians of our global home and to be resolved that a recurrence of the Chernobyl disaster should be avoided at all costs. We cannot excuse ourselves on the grounds that we lack authority.

Above all, those who shoulder the burden of government have a moral responsibility towards their citizens. In an ideal world this would be the criterion for all of their decisions and actions. At the very least, as Elena Vladimirovna has stated, the people deserve to be informed and to be prepared for an eventuality such as Chernobyl.

