

Primary Source 1: An interview of Grandma Peck by her granddaughter Savannah

Savannah: “Grandma, where were you when the Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened?”

Grandma: “Well, I was living in Rochester, NY and I would have been at home when the disaster happened. Your mom was 6 years old at the time and most likely I would have been picking her up from school. Of course at the time I didn’t know – it took days before the news reported about what happened at Chernobyl and the power plant explosion.”

Savannah: “Before you learned about the explosion, what did you know about Chernobyl and the nuclear power plant?”

Grandma: “I didn’t know anything about Chernobyl or the power plant. I didn’t know it existed before the explosion. At the time, people only knew about power plants that were close to their home. I had a friend who worked at a power plant in Illinois so I was aware of that power plant. I never thought my friend was in danger working at a nuclear power plant. Most people weren’t aware of the dangers of nuclear power and we trusted that the government protected us from any danger. My friend never became sick from working there.”

Savannah: “How did you learn about what happened?”

Grandma: “Back then you got all of your information from the main nightly news and the newspaper. There really wasn’t cable TV or 24 hour news so most families learned about the news together at either 6 or 7 pm. This is how I learned about what happened at Chernobyl, on the nightly news after dinner. It’s hard to remember but I believe it was several days after the explosion that the nightly news began to report that something bad had happened. Grandpa would have been travelling back from the Soviet Union when I found out.”

Savannah: “What was the news saying about the explosion?”

Grandma: “I remember them (the news anchors) saying that it was devastating. It was scary because the news and America was trying to learn more information – there was not a lot of detailed information available at the time. We were told that the Soviets were hiding information. The Soviets’ were always hiding information for the United States – this was during

the Cold War of course so no one trusted the Soviets. Everyone was worried that it was worse than what they were saying because the Soviets normally hide these types of things.

Savannah: “What was your reaction when you found out about the explosion?”

Grandma: “Well, of course I thought about Grandpa since he was traveling in the Soviet Union at the time. Back then most Americans did not travel to Russia and grandpa was under close security. . I never really remember being worried about Grandpa because he was on his way home. Plus, we didn’t find out about it until days after it happened since the Soviets were trying to hide the information. I think Grandpa found out first since he was flying through London, England. The people in London found out before we did in the United States.

Certainly the news made people question the safety of nuclear power plants and it made people afraid. And of course our government said ‘Oh no, that could never happen here because the US plants are more safe. However, I remember we had an accident in the US at Three Mile Island a few years before Chernobyl. Everyone at the time was afraid of radioactivity because we were in the middle of the Cold War. I remember our neighbors building basement shelters to protect themselves from radioactivity.’”

Primary Source 2: An interview of Grandpa Peck by his granddaughter Savannah

Savannah: “Grandpa, where were you when the Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened?”

Grandpa: “I was in Moscow doing business at the time of the explosion however no one in the Soviet Union knew about the explosion at that time. I don’t remember hearing about it on the news or in the newspapers while I was in Moscow. I was in the Soviet Union for work and was negotiating a trade agreement with their Russian Eye Institute. The Soviet Union and the United States focused a lot on science and technology during the 1980’s because of the Cold War.

Savannah: “What did you know about Chernobyl and the power plant before the explosion?”

Grandpa: “Well, I knew they had a power plant because the Soviets talked about it a lot. Because of my work, I spoke with many Soviet scientists who talked about science and technology in the Soviet Union. They were very proud of their nuclear power plants and many Soviet scientists competed against American scientists to have the best power plants. I didn’t know the name Chernobyl though and I didn’t know exactly where it was.

Savannah: “How did you learn about what happened?”

Grandpa: “I didn’t find out about it until three days after it exploded while I was in London. At the airport, I heard about it on the radio. I was very scared since I was in Moscow when Chernobyl exploded. They didn’t have laptops back then so I bought a map to see how far away I was from it. It turns out I was only about 200 miles away. Luckily, the wind was blowing towards Europe when I was still in the Soviet Union which protected me from the fallout. I learned about the direction of the wind on the news in my hotel room.”

Savannah: What were the news sources saying in London?

Grandpa: “All the news said was there was an accident at a power plant. No one knew how bad of an explosion it was or how much radioactive fallout there would be. The Soviet leaders were tell us (the West) that they had it under control.”

Savannah: “What was your reaction when you found out?”

Grandpa: “I was scared. I didn’t know right away if it would impact my health since I was in Moscow. We didn’t have the internet back in the 1980’s so it wasn’t as easy to learn about what was going on. People in Europe knew more than people in Moscow knew. I knew Grandma was safe from radiation but she didn’t know I was safe. When I got home I had to reassure Grandma that I was safe but she was still nervous. She threw away all of the expensive chocolate I had brought back as a gift fearing it was radioactive!”

Let’s Discuss

What was different between grandma’s and grandpa’s memories of the Chernobyl explosion?

In what ways were the memories similar?

How was getting news different in the 1980’s compared to today?

Grandma told Savannah in her interview that she and other Americans did not trust the Soviets. Why? How do you think that may have impacted the news of the Chernobyl explosion?

According to grandpa, the Soviet Union and the United States were competing in the field of science and technology. How might this have affected the news of the Chernobyl explosion?