

Poem about the Chernobyl Catastrophe (May 23, 1986)

Abstract

A long-feared nuclear disaster became a reality with the meltdown of a reactor in Chernobyl, Ukraine. The environmental movement spoke to the terrible consequences of the accident in the following poem, which accuses politicians of having failed to provide security and calls for renewed activism.

Source

They Failed

What to do? Buy UHT milk or canned milk?
We don't know.
Pay attention to expiration dates or half-life periods?
We don't know.
Take an umbrella or a shower?
We don't know.
Is the risk to children 23 times or only 17 times that to adults?
We don't know.

It is about more than frozen food
and the question
of safe consumption of fresh spinach
in the right federal states.

Our politicians are playing dead.
Not a sound from the gentlemen, who so like to talk.

When truck drivers once
protested at the border
about processing delays,
Mr. Strauß drove out to the crisis area.
In an SUV.

When women can no longer let their children
play at the playground,
when farmers have to plow under their leaf vegetables,
when people are directly exposed to radiation risk,
not a word from the administration.
The state has gone underground.

Why?

Keep calm,
don't get excited,
wait for the dust to settle:
The nuclear policies cannot be threatened.

Only one of them opens his mouth: Mr. Zimmermann.^[1]

He scolds the Russians,
they have an inhuman information policy,
an irresponsible one,
because they were thinking of nothing but

Keep calm,
don't get excited,
wait for the dust to settle:
The nuclear policies cannot be threatened.

The chancellor gave instructions from the Far East.
The authorities kept the radiation levels a secret.

Today there are 350 nuclear reactors in operation in about 30 countries.
Two have failed terribly.
One in Harrisburg, one in Chernobyl.

Now even more people will die from cancer.
The genes of many people have since then
been pathologically changed, without their knowing.
There will be even more hardship cases and cripples.
The toxins will remain in the food chain.
We are enriching ourselves.

Failure is part of our world.
There is no absolute safety.
All technology has its weak points.
Failure is human.
Not to reckon with failure
is irresponsible and inhuman.
The nuclear industry bets on technological miracles
that do not fail.

But they did fail.

Maybe German nuclear power plants
are twice as safe as the Russian ones.
So it will happen in eight years instead of four.
And Brokdorf is only about 40 miles from Hamburg,
Wackersdorf only 80 miles from Munich,
Biblis only 30 from Frankfurt.

Who will evacuate the people of Hamburg and where to?
Will the people of Munich be evacuated to Capri?
And the people of Frankfurt to the Canary Islands?

Everyone will be left alone.
Like this time.
The politicians will again be incapable
of doing anything.
They will downplay and placate.

No need to panic, they say.

Our worries are understandable, they say,
but absolutely unnecessary.
Above all everything should go on as usual, they say.
Only more safely now.
Nuclear power creates jobs, they say.

Downplaying by ignoramuses.
They see nothing,
they hear nothing,
they learn nothing.
They have only learned how to win elections.

What have we learned?
It is not enough to protest against the information chaos
and the government's cloud of placation.
It is not enough,
because we were shown in a way more impressive than ever before,
the extent to which the politicians
cannot deal with the situation.
(And Chernobyl was just an accident.
Imagine if warheads were exploding.)

Leave the country? Emigrate?
But where to?
Now we can no longer say
that we didn't know about anything.
We cannot flee and emigrate.
The world is becoming more and more our own prison.
The prison of nuclear progress.

If we do not do anything against it today
they will thank us tomorrow
for our silence and for being "reasonable."
Each of us has to think about what he can do.
Each of us at his own place.
This time we won't forget.

NOTES

[1] Friedrich Zimmermann (CSU) was Federal Minister of the Interior from 1982 to 1989—trans.

Source: Inge Aicher-Scholl (published anonymously), "Sie haben versagt", *Die Zeit*, May 23, 1986.
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