Back Talk — When Spooky is Normal: Lessons Learned while Visiting Chernobyl

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Back Talk — When Spooky is Normal: Lessons Learned while Visiting Chernobyl

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There are no libraries in the Exclusion Zone of Chernobyl. The 30-kilometer radius area to which access is allowed only with considerable precautions is cut off from all the realities of our profession still, nearly 35 years after the disaster. So what's a librarian to learn from going there?

We were on our way to the **IFLA World Congress**, meeting this year in Athens, Greece. **IFLA**, as I've written before on these pages, is a wonderful organization in many ways, best of all for bringing together serious professionals from — genuinely — all over the world (this year 140 countries). There are plenty of Euro-Americans in attendance, of course, but the halls are filled as well with colleagues (and by the time you've gone to a few of these conferences, friends) from Sub-Saharan Africa, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, East and Southeast Asia, and all the lands beyond. The great benefit of attendance is the way it reminds one to think of our profession and its issues in a context beyond the great privileges we enjoy as rich Westerners.

And, I like to use the **IFLA** trips to look even further than the rooms full of professional colleagues. How can I use this couple of weeks in the late summer to expand my field of vision further? Well, why not go to Chernobyl (Ukraine is three hours flying time from Greece)? Let me tell a little story.

Chernobyl is the name of the town 20 kilometers south of the reactor complex near the Ukraine-Belarus border where extraordinarily bad Soviet management led to the worst nuclear disaster the planet has yet seen. The recent

HBO series tells the story powerfully: a stress test on a new reactor went badly, steam built up and blew the lid off the reactor, and the consequent exposure to oxygen ignited an explosion and fire that scattered incredibly toxic debris to the atmosphere, where winds from south and east carried the debris to western Europe and (especially) north into neighboring Belarus. Over 100 villages (or hamlets) had to be abandoned completely and the "company town" of Pripjat, a couple of miles from the reactor, was evacuated and now left to deteriorate slowly. It will be some 24 millennia before humans can permanently live and thrive again in this area.

Since 2010, one can visit the sites. I hasten to say that it's perfectly safe to do so — in the sense that the continuing levels of radiation are now low enough that the exposure one receives from going there for a day tour is trivial. All who enter carry radiation detectors and dosimeters as a precaution, and those are examined when one leaves the area. Upon departure, we learned that the radiation picked up that day was about a quarter of what one would get from spending two days in Denver, Colorado. (Higher altitude brings one closer to the largest nuclear reaction in the solar system — the sun

— which is why one also gets radiation from airplane flights.)

That's not to say the Chernobyl area is 100% safe in every way. Workers who continue to spend their days very close to the reactor (gathering data, working on core-cooling, doing routine maintenance as well) are carefully monitored and usually manage about three months in a calendar year working before being pulled away for having reached the normal limit of one year's safe exposure — it's vastly better than the situation in the days and months after the explosion and safe enough for tourism. About 6,000 service providers live in Chernobyl village, providing basic services

like food and medical care — 3,000 stay for 15 days, return home to Kyiv, as the next 3,000 return for their next 15-day shift. And so on. Our tour guide and driver is a dentist in Chernobyl. Having gone to dental school on a government scholarship, he was obligated to work for three years as assigned by the State, but he liked Chernobyl so much (peaceful, quiet, lots of verdant growth) that he's stayed for 7.5 years so far.

What does one see? The drive is about 2.5 hours from Kyiv — where my only relatives live — on increasingly bumpy roads. (The drive, especially with poor suspension, may be more dangerous than the lingering radiation!) At a checkpoint at the 30-kilometer mark, visitors and workers register their ID or passport details, tourists collect radiation devices, and we drive on.

The first stop is the site of one of the abandoned villages, where a "cultural center" built in 1959 is being swallowed up in forest the way temples around Siem Reap (Cambodia) yield to the jungle. Then in a few kilometers comes the town of Chernobyl itself. The town was spared the worst of the disaster and is now the headquarters and residence for the people who work on site, such as our tour guide dentist. He too stopped to get his personal radiation-recording device, part of the usual routine for all workers. Chernobyl itself looks like a western military base: boring, cheap architecture, spread out, Soviet bureaucracy style. The one striking stop was at a newly refurbished Orthodox church (in Ukraine as in Russia, there is money for churches these days) with a memorial to the dead of the disaster. The number of official victims is tiny — mainly the firemen who were stationed a few hundred yards from the reactor and who scrambled to put out the fire on the

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first night and day after the explosion — all of whom died shortly after the exposure.

Twenty kilometers further north looms a half-completed cooling tower in the familiar shape. The reactor that blew was the fourth to go into operation on the site, with two more under construction and six more beyond that on the plans. Now the two unfinished reactors and their cooling tower sit rusting in the sunlight. By contrast, Reactor Four, the culprit, looks surprisingly normal. A giant half-cylinder containment structure has recently been built over the reactor and its original concrete containment. The nuclear material below these structures will take another 24,000 years to cool itself into innocuousness. Work continues around it to manage containment and further cleanup — those are the workers who spend about three months a year right there.

Two miles further on is the ghost town of Pripyat. At its peak, 50,000 people lived there, people with good jobs, careers, and prospects. The growth of the reactor complex meant that promotion and good pay were all but guaranteed. The hulks of a hotel, another cultural center, and an amusement park with its iconic still-standing Ferris wheel are all to be seen. One building has a partly collapsing

sign on the roof: “The atom should be for the workers, not for the soldiers.” It was hard not to be both sad and confused. All is so quiet, nature is so powerful (wildlife is returning to the area in abundance, secure from human predators), and everything looked so normal on a summer's day — still, one couldn't help but imagine the inferno and the tragedies of that time.

And then it was on to Athens and IFLA-WLIC. Lessons learned? Our modern societies depend absolutely on the huge complexity of scientific learning that we capture in libraries; and at the same time depend on the currency of that information to deal with situations where human ambitions outrun current technology. Racing ahead to expand our knowledge is essential to avoiding disasters.

But one is also forced to meditate on the long term. Chernobyl is a microcosmic example of what we can fear from other planetary disasters. It's a reminder that the preservation of what humankind knows and the accessibility of the information that we preserve must not be taken for granted. As we go about our daily chores and deeds, we should remember that the seemingly less urgent tasks of preservation are not ones to be allowed to drift down our to-do lists. The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone will be a toxic waste dump for another 24,000 years — can we hope in libraries to be sources of enlightenment for an equally long period? When will there once again be a library in the Exclusion Zone of Chernobyl? 🍀