



## CHAPTER 1

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# Power to the People—Germany

Ursula Sladek is a founder of Elektrizitätswerke Schönau (EWS), one of the largest eco-electricity providers in Europe, and the largest that is run by citizens. EWS's aim to decentralize and democratize the energy supply makes it the nucleus of a continuously expanding national network of independent power generators utilizing a range of technologies.

ONE OF THE CHURCHES IN SCHÖNAU, A SMALL TOWN OF 2,500 inhabitants deep in the Black Forest region of Germany, has a very high tower. If you climb up and look out over the town at the right time of day, all you see are hundreds of solar panels reflecting the light and winking back at you. You can almost feel them blinking, “We did it, we did it. We broke the power monopoly. We are our own power source, we are the source of light in the Black Forest.”

Not coincidentally, Schönau is where Ursula Sladek and her family live. But Ursula’s family does not consist of only the usual suspects. Besides her husband and children she has thousands of other “family members”—all owners, comrades, and members of Elektrizitätswerke Schönau (EWS), the electric power company she created more than twenty years ago to replace nuclear and coal energy with renewable sources. From Ursula’s perspective:

*Energy issues are very, very interesting because it’s an issue for the whole world. Not only for Germany or Europe, it’s really for the whole world. In the end, it will also be tied to whether we will have war or peace. If you think about climate changes, there will be millions of people migrating to the rich, highly industrialized countries due to drought, floods, heat, or cold making it difficult to live in their own countries. It is the developed nations that have the highest CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but it is the poor countries that feel the impact on the climate the most because they have to live in it. These will be the victims of the climate changes more than we.<sup>1</sup>*

### *Just a Housewife*

Chernobyl was Ursula’s turning point, Fukushima her tipping point. Separated by twenty-five years, both nuclear disasters have served to bring the energy issues of this planet to the forefront of people’s minds. In 1986 Ursula was a self-described housewife. Like many Europeans, she was concerned and fearful about the



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close proximity of Chernobyl and the disaster's effects on her town, her environment, and her children.

Ursula was sidelined with a broken thighbone at the time of the Chernobyl nuclear leak. As radioactive particles landed on sidewalks and streets not far from her home, she watched her children playing outside with an anxious heart. It was at that moment that she knew she needed to get the worry of nuclear fallout out of her life and vowed to see the end to energy sources rife with unintended negative consequences. With her husband and community friends she founded Parents for a Nuclear-Free Future to ensure a safe alternative for their children.

As she told a German newspaper, "We were naïve enough to believe that energy policies and the energy industry would change after Chernobyl. . . . But nothing changed at all. So there was no alternative but to roll up our sleeves and take matters into our own hands."<sup>2</sup>

For the next thirteen years Ursula and her widely extended family would work to influence both residents and politicians on why and how to reduce energy consumption and opt out of nuclear power. They learned all about generating as well as saving energy. Within that space of time, they finally won a referendum that allowed the town to separate from the national power grid and develop its own sources of renewable energy.

After the long journey to victory was over, Ursula realized that the measure passed in large part because the citizens of Schönau were confident that they could achieve something others had always said was impossible. And if the town could do it, maybe she could do something similar.

As she explains:

*I was just a housewife and a parent. I was quite shy and had never really done anything like this before. I had no business experience, I was not a scientist. I started by taking one step at a time.*





So in 1991 she spearheaded the effort to buy the local power grid (the electrical transmission and distribution network) and set up a new company that would replace it. It was Germany's first cooperatively owned power-supply company and one of the first in Europe. Six years later, Ursula and her band of "electricity rebels" (so named by the media) managed, within a rather short time, to magically raise the money from all parts of Germany to buy their grid.

*In 1998 I was already fifty years old. I had to learn how to use a computer, how to speak in public, how to run a company; all of which was something quite new for me. But I found that if I asked my friends who owned companies for advice on how they managed this and that, I could learn from the best of them. I tried what they told me and it either worked or it did not work. If it didn't, I asked somebody else. I needed to learn everything I had to do.*



Building block heating stations and installing solar panels as a start, EWS began to produce some of its own energy. The hundred-year-old monopoly of large power companies in Germany was broken and EWS was poised to influence the entire structure of the electricity and power industry. Just one year later, Germany deregulated the energy industry (coincidence?) making it possible for EWS to sell its renewable energy across Germany. Within the wink of a solar panel, EWS went national.



### *Replaceable, Rethinkable, Reinventable, Renewable*

When your mission is firmly grounded in social change, you have the freedom to reinvent your business in ways that allow for participation of those who can help you mobilize a movement. True to EWS's primary goal of decentralizing and democratizing the energy supply, Ursula decided to make the company truly





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public—people who would invest in the company would become owners and have a voting share in company matters. Great idea, but first she had to motivate townspeople to invest their money by educating them about all facets of renewable, nuclear, and coal power, persuade them to take part in creating and finding renewable energy sources, and convince them that this would be a good investment for their money.

This hybrid social model is not at all common in Germany—nor for that matter in most parts of the world. But early on, Ursula realized that to start a movement you need people, and lots of them. They have to be invested intellectually, emotionally, and financially. Her model allows for everyone in the town to take part in the solution to their energy needs, and to take charge of their future. All get to be components of the change, elements of the revolution. All get to be changemakers in as small or large a way as they want and can manage.

EWS started in 1997, in one town with 650 local members. It is now owned cooperatively by 1,500 members and supplies power to 120,000 households, representing 250,000 people across Germany. The source of all their energy is green, mostly from hydropower operations, but also solar panels, wind turbines, and small co-generation plants in people's homes. Members can use the energy they produce for their own purposes and sell the extra electricity to the grid. The company's member shareholders receive dividends, but all the rest goes into new renewable power plants and training and supporting communities who want to run their own green energy projects, modeled by Schönau.

Cooperatives inspired by EWS are springing up in small cities all across Germany. Even larger cities like Stuttgart are deciding to take their grid and energy supply in their own hands. Many towns are partnering with EWS to develop their cooperative model and get citizens involved as members from the beginning. Global





inquiries are coming from everywhere—Italy, the Netherlands, Japan, Korea, Chile, the United States, and Canada all have sent representatives to Schönau to see if the model could be used in their own countries. Ursula gets requests for more than a hundred speeches a year. A few years ago, Ursula was in Japan and gave sixteen speeches within three weeks. Sadly, she was not able to convince the Japanese to loosen their dependence on nuclear power, but since Fukushima she has been receiving so much renewed interest in that country that she made available her “100 Good Reasons Against Nuclear Power” booklet in Japanese. She has just been invited to speak at the Global Conference for a Nuclear Free World taking place in 2012 in Yokohama, Japan.

### *One Solution Fits All*



Ironically, the recent financial crisis worked to Ursula’s advantage. She has started to notice that instead of individual citizens coming to her asking how to replicate EWS in their town or city, she is now getting inquiries from town administrators and politicians who have been observing what Schönau has done and want to buy back their own grids. But interestingly enough, they now have two equally persuasive reasons for doing so. Like EWS, they want to have a higher percentage of renewable energy and self-determination. But secondly, they realize that if the large power companies control the system, the money and profits go to them, but if you operate your own grid you keep that money in your town’s pockets. Since all communities could always use additional financial resources, these two complementary capabilities tip the value proposition in favor of an eco-friendly, community-owned power supply chain where environment, control, and financial reward become powerful but integrated motivators. However, though the municipalities are





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ready for change, they need mentorship and an experienced partner to be an effective changemaking entity, so they turn to Ursula and EWS for help. Once they ask if EWS wants to partner with them, Ursula's prime condition is that they institute a cooperative model so the community inhabitants are fully involved in the new grid as co-owners and co-changemakers.

What's interesting is that instead of working with citizens to force the change from the bottom up, Ursula is now working with the government and administrative bureaucracies, coming at it from the other direction. The model is getting to be so successful, financially rewarding, and environmentally sustainable that it is attractive to citizens and governments alike.

### *Mobilizing the Normal People*



From her perspective, Ursula is thrilled with EWS's trajectory. In 2009, her publicly owned company was worth 67 million euros; in 2010, around 82 million. She is hoping to serve 1 million customers in the next few years. Twenty-five years after Ursula stopped being "just a housewife," she is still convinced that it's the citizens, the so-called normal people, who are at the core of the model. She knows that they need to invest not only financially but also behaviorally in creating and using renewable sources of energy themselves. For example, EWS encourages people to install a windmill or some solar panels to generate power, and EWS gives them the support they need to do so. Ursula feels that when people invest their money in cooperatives they will realize the returns both financially and environmentally:



*In the end, the change from nuclear and fossil energies to renewable energy is such a great task it really needs everybody. It is so very important to motivate the people to take part. You cannot*





*just say well, the government should do it or the power suppliers should do it. Governments have a great influence on other governments and big power companies, but it is not so easy for them to do something so outside the normal way things have been run for the past hundred years. So it needs the people. And that is what is happening in Germany because there is such a large anti-nuclear movement.*

At sixty-four, Ursula is still pushing the renewable energy agenda whenever and wherever she can. The five news headlines that follow give you a sense of how busy she has been. In the past few months, Germany has decided to close down all of its nuclear power plants. Coincidence? You decide.

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CNN News, Nick Glass, September 26, 2011	Ursula Sladek: The Housewife Who Powered a Green Revolution
AP, Associated Press, May 30, 2011	Germany Decides to Close Down Nuclear Power Plants by 2022 “Chancellor Angela Merkel said she hopes the transformation to more solar, wind and hydroelectric power serves as a roadmap for other countries.”
Guardian.co.uk, May 21, 2011	Ursula Sladek—The Power Behind the Green Revolution “British green campaigners often point to Germany as a showcase for renewables—as if this were down to an enlightened government. Sladek’s story suggests that the change was actually a grass roots one, with families and communities working together.”

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Spiegel Online International, May 30, 2011	“On Saturday, tens of thousands of people took part in anti-nuclear demonstrations in 20 German cities, demanding a speedy phaseout of atomic energy.”
Online.WSJ.com, May 30, 2011	Update: Germany to Drop Nuclear Power by 2022 “Lawmakers from Merkel’s coalition parties said that the power-generation gap would ideally be filled by renewable energy sources and relatively climate-friendly gas-fired power plants.”

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