

ELVIJS*, Latvia

Elvijs was a bus driver and 34 years old when he was ordered to go to Chernobyl as a liquidator. He had 24 hours to pack his things. That was two years after the accident. Dita Betere, whose mother works with Elvijs, wrote down his fascinating story.

I spoke to Elvijs in his office. He was happy that I came to talk to him because he works as a guard in a Bread factory and doesn't have much to do during the day ☺ so we talked for 4 hours. For 4 hours! (*I think it's a lot. Well, we didn't talk about Chernobyl all the time, a lot of different topics were discussed that day*). During our conversation only 3 people stopped by. I don't think it disturbed him from digging in his memories, though. He really was willing to talk. And this place was the only possible way to conduct the interview because it was his last working day and on the next day he went to a town that's on the other side of Latvia.

My time witness refused to be photographed, but I'll give you a short description. When I entered the room I was surprised that he's the one I'm going to interview, he really didn't look like a 56-year-old man. His skin looked definitely better than that of some 40-year-olds. He was wearing a hat, but when he took it down, a hairless top of the head appeared (*he's not completely bald*). As he confessed, he's really sad about the loss of his hair because he "had such lovely, thick hair".

1 – Familiar background of the time witness

Elvijs was born in Balvi district in 1954. He was the only child in the family. His mother was a housewife, his father worked in construction. Now both parents are dead, he didn't like to talk about them. During his school time he wasn't a really a learning-type-kid although he was (*and still is*) quick-witted (*he told about different TV games where he shows an amazing erudition ☺*). He really enjoyed skipping classes and playing different games with popguns in the spring and hockey in the winter.

He has a secondary education but for all his life he has worked as a driver and remembers these times with happiness. After school for a short time he served in the army in the Middle East. He married not long after school and had a daughter. He refused to talk about the Cold War. When I asked our questions about the Cold War he just asked them right back at me and asked what can he answer. *I'll give an example – I ask: „How did the Cold War affect your view on security in your country?” Elvijs: “Well, how can it affect that? Mm?” and it was like this also with questions connected to nuclear energy, political views, debates, commemoration of the event.*

So I didn't get informative replies to these questions.

2 – Knowledge about and the attitude towards nuclear energy before the Chernobyl catastrophe

He knew that radiation is dangerous but he says he never thought about consequences of it or anything connected to this question because "What's the point? They are going to build these power stations anyway. Thank God they are not building the power stations in Latvia!" He has always been against nuclear energy and admires countries where people use alternative energy, but has never joined any clubs or movements against nuclear energy.

3 – How did the time witness experience the catastrophe?

When he first heard about the accident, he didn't really discuss it with anyone, only felt sorry for those people who lived close to the reactor and all the people who suffered from it. (*He repeated these sentences several times-that he really feels sorry for them*). But he didn't worry about himself because in the news it was told it's not going to seriously affect Latvia, that the dangerous cloud moves in a different direction and Latvians are not in danger.

After a while he started hearing about liquidators, that their health is affected and heard more about the risks and then he really hoped that he wouldn't be taken as a liquidator. He knew that some men were going there voluntarily and he deeply disapproved of that, because most of them, as he says, went because the government promised them prize-money, cars for free and a lot of other offers. With a grin said: „I really would like to meet them now and ask whether it was worth it. Why did they have to sneak into this? I had no choice, they took me, but they had a choice and they chose wrong”.

Two years after the accident, on his last working day before a vacation, officers came to him after his work day (he was a bus driver at the time) and said that after 24 hours he's leaving to Chernobyl, „pack your things!” They asked him to take some money and „a piece of meat” (*well, these are the exact words he used*). His wife and daughter was already waiting in Ventspils (a town in Latvia, that's about 441km from Balvi, the town he lived) to spend his vacation. But he didn't get to go there, he was sent in a completely different direction.

So, he and about 15 people (all men) from Balvi drove a bus to Rīga where they got instructions and army uniforms, but no other special equipment. Then they took a train to **Olvuča** (*not sure what the official name is*) and then a bus to go to the village where they lived in all their working time. He doesn't remember the name of it, but the liquidators weren't the only ones who lived there, all native inhabitants, several hundreds of people, also still were there.

They worked in a place called **Poļeskaja** (*not sure if that's the official name of it*). The life there was like in an army. They lived in a tent for 10 people (with Russians, Estonians, Lithuanians and other Latvians), slept in bunk beds. Their instructions said not to eat local fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, milk, not to heat their tent with local wood and not to drink water, but there wasn't any other way to get food – all local inhabitants, as well as regiments of liquidators ate and used them because there was no other food.

Elvijs remembers that locals were happy that thanks to the Chernobyl accident they had their roads repaired, water supplies changed and the buildings renovated... There were all kind of jobs they had to do – removing the soil, putting up new roofs for the houses of locals, changing fences, and it wasn't a rare occasion that they were asked to pick up potatoes or whatever their officer told them to do. He tells that they measured the radiation of, for example, roofs. Then they changed them because of radiation. On the next day they checked the radiation again, and it was on the same level as it was before changing the roof.

As he was a driver, he also had to take people from one place to another. His bus, as he told, was full with radiation. When he wanted to repair it and put his head under the bus, his head started to pulse and hurt and he felt dizziness, but still he continued to drive it because there wasn't another one and they needed a bus. He remembers one day, when he had to carry people out of the zone, the zone border guards said that the bus can't leave the territory (the bus is radiated), so he sneaked out with the bus through paths in the woods in order to get his passengers to the places they needed to get to...

In the beginning he was told that he was going to be in the Ukraine for 6 month, but after 3 month of work the regiment was disbanded (he was there from August). While working there he received 140 Rubles salary. On the last day, when the regiments were disbanded, he was the one that got home first. One of the officers asked him to take all cars out of the territory, which would have meant a lot of driving forward and backward. Elvijs asked the officer to get him some chains so that he could put some cars together and reduce the driving time (*apparently the officer didn't think of this himself*) and as a reward got to go back home first. Superiors gave him money for train and he got home. But he remembers some soldiers who stayed there longer, and they had to get home as they could – nobody gave them money for the train or the bus.

4 – In which context were Chernobyl and the nuclear energy issue important in the further life of the time witness?

Right after the liquidation the benefit was 120 Rubles that rose to 60 Lats during the years. He says it's really nothing because all the money goes for medications. He was

allowed to pay half of public facilities and public transport but in the 90s this help ended. He stresses that no money in the world can compensate the lack of health.

The most serious health problems are with the bones and the stomach. He wasn't able to have children anymore after Chernobyl. Talking about health – he remembers that during liquidation months, whenever a soldier complained of a headache or anything else, the only thing they got from doctors were two medications – that was the solution for every possible disease.

After arriving back in Latvia he had to have a medical exam every year in Riga and lie in a special hospital for some time, but now when the government's budget is tight, these visits are no longer paid for. He just checks himself into the local Balvi hospital whenever he feels a need.

There is no way he would be a liquidator voluntarily now knowing the consequences. But he also doesn't regret that he was there. He says: „If it hadn't been me, someone else would have done it.” He feels sorry for his lost health but at the same time he is happy he's still alive because a lot of his friends that also were liquidators, are dead.

So the next year he'll start enjoying his retirement (*this month he still has to work*) - play with grandchildren and work in his garden trying not to think about his health so much.

* The name of the interviewee was changed at his request