

Anatoly Myshjakov, Russia



Ksenia Srednyak interviewed an acquaintance of her mother's, Mr. Anatoly Myshjakov, an electric welder who was sent to Chernobyl in 1987 to repair special spherical cranes in the damaged third power unit. His recollection of this dangerous work was very vivid.

Family Background

Anatoly Myshjakov was born in 1949 in Ilovlya (the Volgograd region). Soon thereafter his family and he moved to Volgograd, where he finished school. After the army he started to work for the Volgograd metallurgical works "Barrikadi" as an electric welder. He worked there for 33 years. At the moment he is on a pension.

The interview took place in the office of my mother. I chose that place because Anatoly lives close to it. At first my interview partner seemed a bit constrained and watchful and his answers were curt. But when he started to remember his trip to Chernobyl, he felt more free and relaxed. Our conversation lasted about two hours. I had the impression that he was talking about his Chernobyl experience for the first time and he really needed that reflection. When we

finished our interview, he asked me to wait and brought from home some pictures and things which could illustrate his story.

Attitude towards nuclear energy before the catastrophe

Before the accident he thought that the nuclear energy is the future of mankind. But he had no idea about the nuclear power plants – how it works and looks inside.

The experience of the Chernobyl accident

It is well-known that huge manpower was sent for the liquidation of the catastrophe. In 1987 the Volgograd factory “Barrikadi” was drawn for the reconstruction of the third power-generating unit. Anatoly was sent to Chernobyl too. On my question, was it a free-will or forced trip, he smiled bitterly: “I think there are not free-will persons for trips like this”.

At first the group from the “Barrikadi” factory was sent to Gor’kii (now Nizhny Novgorod). There they had a special training for two weeks. At the beginning of July they arrived in Chernobyl. The task of Anatoly and his group was to repair or substitute special spherical cranes in the third power unit, which had been damaged during the accident. Nobody did it before that is why they started with the working up of technology.

As my interview partner tells me, by that time the fourth power-unit was in the sarcophagus. The wall between the fourth and the third power-units was restored, the rooms were being edged with the lead, and everything was cleaned by the soldiers. The territory around the nuclear power station had been already cleaned; all the trees were taken away by the bulldozers. Around the station was the 30-kilometre zone, where you couldn’t enter without special pass. All the time special engines watered that territory because when it is damp, you don’t inhale so much dust. “The most terrible thing” says Anatoly “was of course radiation. You don’t feel it, you don’t see it, you don’t hear it but you understand that it is everywhere...”



Precautionary measures during the work were very relative. In fact there was no protection. Anatoly tells that they were mainly protected by soldiers: "Before we entered the room a specialist checked the background radiation. If it was above the norm, the soldiers came and

started to clean the room. They used hoses for it – like firemen. If after the cleaning the background radiation was not still suitable for our work, they did again. <...> Of course the soldiers suffered most of all”.

The uniform of liquidators consisted of white trousers, jackets, caps and respirators. Their clothes were controlled with special “irons” three times a day: if it was polluted, you have to change it. Everybody also had a personal device which shows the level of radiation in the rooms. Besides it they always had a storage device, it took stock of the radiation they got during the whole time. Before you left, you had to give it to special laboratory and get the results after. But my interviewee didn’t do – and now it is only thing¹ he has from that trip. He recalled about this storage device during the interview and after our conversation he brought it to me and let take pictures.



¹ When the liquidators left Chernobyl, it was forbidden to take away the things they used at the nuclear power station because everything was irradiated.

Anatoly worked in the third unit where there were, as he says, a thousand of different passages. It was very difficult to orientate there because all the windows were closed by brick or lead plates. Later the floors were painted in different colors, it helped. The door to the room where Anatoly worked was lead and very thick (more than 1 meter). "That was sinister... Of course there was no wish to enter that door. It makes my flesh creep", remembers Anatoly.

Because of the radiation the workers could not stay in the room for a long time. For example, my interview partner tried to do his work for 2 minutes: he came running into the room, fixed the welding machine and ran into the other "cleaner" room from where he operated the machine. There were days when they didn't work at all because the background radiation was too high – then they trained in a special classroom.

The working day lasted 12 hours. Anatoly didn't remember if they had days off: in fact they didn't need them because they didn't know how to spend their free time – there were no places to visit. Once, his colleagues and he went for a walk in Chernobyl. The settlement was totally empty: he remembers only torn wallpapers, fallen fences. He didn't see any cat or dog – after the accident all the animals were killed.

In fact people had no true information about the accident and its consequences. Anatoly says that when the newspapers started to write about it, it seemed absurd. For example, they wrote that in one year there would be half of the radiation and in a few years the Chernobyl area would not be dangerous any more. It makes no sense because the nuclear decay lasts more than one hundred years.

I asked my interview partner if he had some pictures of that time. He explained that it was impossible to make pictures inside the nuclear station because of radiation: if you take the photographic film to the station, it immediately becomes spoiled. It was the same with the X-ray photography. For example, after the welding the specialists had to test the welds for leakproofness. But it was very difficult because the quality of X-ray photographs was very bad. The radiographs were kept between the lead plates.

The first pictures of the Chernobyl station were made from the planes and helicopters but they are also not good enough (too dim) because the radiation influenced the film.

During the conversation my interview partner talked a few times about the food. He said that it was very various and lavish: much meat, fruit and vegetables, sweets, different sorts of fizzy water (even Coke). Because he worked in the red zone, the most dangerous one, he had a double helping. But the alcohol was forbidden (prohibition law), although, as the others told Anatoly, the first liquidators officially got 100 g of vodka – like the soldiers on the front before the battle.

My interview partner worked with the people from all over the country – from Gor’kii, Rostov, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskyi (the Far East) etc. - from everywhere except the local area because the local population was irradiated. He made friends with some of his colleagues but at the moment they don’t keep in touch with each other: “We were seven from Volgograd. Now only three of us are still alive. We all are invalids. There are other acquaintances but we don’t meet any more, because we all are sick, some of us can’t go out”.

On the 4th of August 1987 Anatoly left for Volgograd. Some of his colleagues, for example, his friend from Gor’kyi, stayed for the second term because they wanted to earn more money. The wages of liquidators were quite high. For one month in Chernobyl Anatoly got five his “normal” wages. But for him that was not a reason to stay there longer.

In 1988, when the third power unit of the Chernobyl nuclear power station was started up again, my interview partner got a premium for his work in Chernobyl.

Anatoly says that he has no grudge against the state: “I still get a financial support: pension, different privileges – for example, I pay half for public utilities, can go by public transport for free, once a year I am also be able to get a free voucher to a health centre”.

I also asked my interview partner about the attitude of his family to his trip to Chernobyl. “I didn’t inform them, I said that it would be an ordinary business trip. Otherwise there would be much clamour. Of course they have known it later: I wrote letter and phoned them from Chernobyl”. But after his return they didn’t really talk it over, they didn’t ask and he didn’t tell them in detail about his Chernobyl experience.

The importance of nuclear energy in the further life

The catastrophe didn't really influence Anatoly's attitude to nuclear energy. He still thinks that it is a future of power engineering: "Many planes crashed but people don't stop to fly. And it doesn't mean that the idea of the plane was bad. The same with nuclear energy". At the same time he says that the danger of using this source of energy is extremely high that is why all the nuclear power stations should be objects of special attention and should have a very reliable system of protection against the accidents.

The importance of Chernobyl today

He thinks that the accident shows how responsible the work at the nuclear power stations is. It is work only for specialists because the price for mistakes is too high. "I was there when the experts were clearing up the reasons of the catastrophe", says Anatoly. "It was found that most workers at the Chernobyl power station had no special education. They graduated from Agricultural Institute, Teacher's Institute, even Sports Academy".

P.S. After the interview a colleague of my mother drove me home. He also talked about Chernobyl: "They wanted to send me to Chernobyl too. But when I got the call-up papers from the local military office, I escaped. My family and I moved to another place and stayed there for one year. The point is that I was a very good candidate for them because by that time I had already got two children. It means that I won't produce mutants".