

Jiří Kožmín, Czech Republic



Ondřej Kolínský interviewed his mother's boyfriend, Jiří Kožmín, who used the process of radiation in his job and thus had his doubts when Czechoslovakian newspapers initially wrote that there were no radioactive leaks in Chernobyl.

My interviewee's name is Jiří Kožmín, he is my mother's boyfriend. He was born in 1954 in Prague, studied a technical school and has worked as an engineer ever since. He says he understood quite well the basics of nuclear reaction and the way power plants work from some introductory courses in school.

On April 29th when the first article about the accident was published in Czech newspapers, Jiří says he was quite certain that it was impossible that there was no leak of radioactivity as claimed in the paper. By that time he was working in Railroad Research Institute as a defectoscopist (the defects are found by shining the rails through by a strong radiance) and thanks to that had some devices used to measure radiation. As it was raining that day and he knew that the radioactive particles would be brought down by the drops of rain, he went outside to the Prague streets to check if their level changed. He found no deviation from the usual level, though.

Later on, he learnt from his friends working in similar area at the airport and using probably more exact instruments that the radioactive background was roughly at five times of its normal level. Although the media were remaining silent about the leak and the possible danger, people knew pretty well what was happening because this information spread quite quickly by the oral way.

"The more you know about something, the less likely you are to be frightened by that thing," he says now when I ask about his worries. He knew what the dangers were and could

see through the official lies easily - on the other hand he did not panic because the situation of Czechoslovakia wasn't that serious. Jiří didn't change his behaviour in any respect, "I don't eat mushrooms and there was nothing else to be afraid of," he explains. "Five times the normal values are still nothing dangerous for people."

All in all, it was more like a little curiosity for him and his friends. At least it feels like that when he tells me about estimating which cloud soaked the biggest portion of the dangerous particles in the Ukraine and following its way through Europe in weather forecast and thus predicting which parts of the continent were hit the most.

It is pretty much the same case when I ask how strongly it influenced his attitude towards the government. "The way they were informing about it didn't surprise me at all. Well, it was just another drop, nothing more," says Jiří and explains that after directly experiencing the regime's restriction there's not many illusions you can lose.

Similarly, his opinion about nuclear power remained unchanged after 1986. He is generally pro, only worries about the impact on the environment because, he argues, large scales of hot vapour and water leaking to the surrounding air and rivers change the local climate and may have negative effects on plants and animals. This would be solved – and the danger of a potential accident reduced – by not building a few giant power plants but rather more smaller ones.

Although Jiří doesn't see the event as some crucial point in the history, he believes in its importance as a historical fact and says that he mentions it quite often during his staff training lessons in his work. It definitely shouldn't be forgotten.

We conducted the interview at home and the atmosphere was accordingly quite calm as if we normally talk, the most scary things in the room being the camera on the table and my notes (which have by the way become even more scary now as I'm trying to exploit some information from them).